

Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.

AN ECUMENICAL WEEKLY June 12, 1963

THE STORY OF

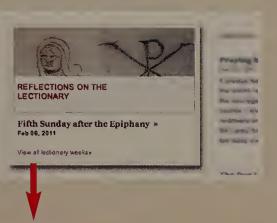
Letter from

Birmingham Jail

Martin Luther King, Jr.



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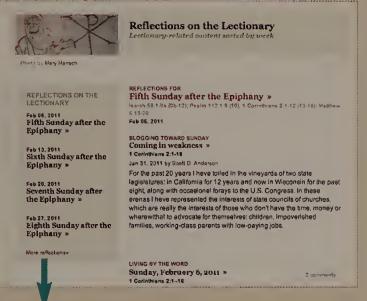
Current week

All weeks

Ash Wednesday > Mar 00, 2011

First Sunday in Lent »

is 2;15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32, Romans 5:12-19; Matthey



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Editor's by John M. Buchanan

The Bible's violent God

WITHOUT INTENDING TO, I turned to the History Channel's The Bible recently and saw the birth of Moses, the slaughter of Hebrew babies and the rescue of baby Moses from the river. I experienced discomfort bordering on revulsion at the occasional exaggeration of the biblical narrative, yet I kept watching as Moses killed an Egyptian guard who was beating a slave and fled into the wilderness looking like Norman Mailer after a night of drinking, brawling and carousing. There he encountered Yahweh in a burning bush that reminded me of a fireworks display over Navy Pier in Chicago.

Along with millions of other viewers, I saw Moses return to the palace to confront the new pharaoh. The Passover angel of death moved through the city streets in a creeping fog that reminded me of the fog of mosquito insecticide that spewed from city trucks years ago. Then the Red Sea parted in the nick of time for the Hebrews before it flooded back to drown Pharaoh's pursuing army. There was death and destruction everywhere, all orchestrated and carried out by God.

Who could believe in a God like this? Who could believe in a God who orders his people to destroy the inhabitants of Canaan, making certain that everyone is dead, just to make way for God's people?

The problem with The Bible and most media representations of the biblical story is that they are so literal. In the effort to get the details of the story right, the storyteller misses the point. Over the years, most of us come to an accommodation with biblical texts that stretch the imagination—particularly those texts that portray God as vengeful, angry and murderous. We parse the Red Sea story as a myth, a story that reveals an important truth about God and human beings. Maybe the Red Sea was a swamp; maybe the pursuing Egyptian chariots became mired in the mud; maybe the people of God told the story of their ancestors' unlikely escape from Egypt and added details with each retelling. But for most of us the point is not the story; the point is the gracious providence of God, which operates in history as hope and justice and love.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan who directs the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico (and writes a fine daily meditation online), offers a working hermeneutic for interpreting scripture. In regard to any text, Rohr proposes: "If you see God operating at a lesser level than the best person you know, then the text is not authentic revelation." If God is love (1 John 4:16), then no person could be more loving than God, Rohr says. "God is never less loving than the most loving person you know."

Most of us, like Rohr, do not believe, cannot believe, that God told the Hebrew people to kill everyone who got in their way. No doubt the Hebrews did commit horrible acts; history is full of such stories. But the voice they heard wasn't God's

It's a sad reality that many continue to believe that God orchestrates death, destruction and human suffering and orders people to kill. That, in my mind, is a gross and harmful distortion.



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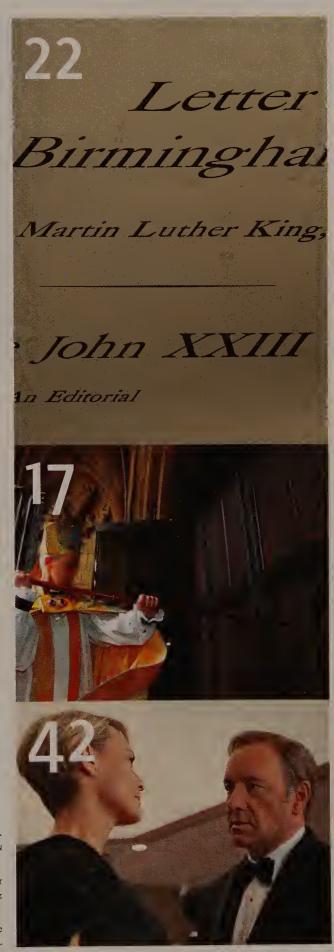
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The Bible and children

aving just begun work on a sermon that begins with the question, "How do we tell our children the stories of the Bible?" I was particularly interested in Sarah Hinlicky Wilson's article "R-rated: How to read the Bible with children" (March 6). I was disappointed, however, with her apparent conclusion. Though the review of various children's story bibles was interesting, the heart of the matter seemed encapsulated in an exchange-which Wilson quotes-between two mothers at a book giveaway table. In answer to the mother who declined to take a book that opened with the line, "God was angry at the world . . . ," Wilson points to Genesis and the words attributed to God there: "I have determined to make an end to all flesh ..."

The key, I believe, is whether these stories are repeated and taught to children or adults as revelatory of God's character, words and actions or as a human construction of God's character, words and actions—whether it is a "holy" Bible because it contains God's words or whether it is "holy" because it contains unvarnished stories of the human struggle to find meaning and purpose in life.

The banner of the CENTURY contains the words "thinking critically," a skill that should be nurtured from the earliest possible age, especially with regard to scripture. There must be a movement from enthrallment with individual stories and characters to thoughtful understanding of the Bible as a collection of stories that show the evolving concepts that people hold about God and good and evil.

The movement, for adults and children, would more usefully be from "what does God say?" to "what have people said about God?" and finally to "what do you say?"

Martha Porter Highlands, N.C.



agree with Wilson that we should not Ltry to control the problematic Bible we introduce to our children. But surely we have a responsibility to try to explain some of the more thorny passages. Early on children learn to differentiate fiction and fantasy from reality. Soon they learn (ideally from their parents) the meaning of metaphor (God is not a rock or an eagle); simile or parable (the kingdom of God is like a man who . . .); hyperbole (cut off your offending hand, hate your father and mother); figurative language (suffering in fire as analagous to being totally estranged from God); dated material (a disobedient son is stoned to death, slaves are called to obey their masters); and pre-Christ writings (enemies are to be hated, their babies bashed against the boulders).

Let's give our children at a relatively young age the tools they need to understand the Bible. Such a gift should spare them some of the turmoil and pain of growing up with this wonderful book. Perhaps, to quote Wilson, "faith comes only as a gift of the Holy Spirit, not through the problem solving of anxious adherents to the Christian religion." But why should we throw outrageously

heavy burdens on our children that may hamper the Spirit's work, when there are better options?

John Asa Hertzler Harrisonburg, Va.

s a retired pastor and a grandfather, I appreciated Wilson's analysis of several popular children's Bibles. A concern of mine, however, and one that she did not raise, is how to avoid giving children the impression that all Bible stories should be taken literally. A literal approach to the Bible is difficult to unlearn as a teen or adult, and it sometimes causes those raised in the faith to abandon the church altogether. Let's tell our children that the story of Jonah is a folk tale, help them to see the humor in it (the cattle of Nineveh dressed in sackcloth!) and explore with them the book's meaning (God cares about the people we call enemies). Reading the stories without interpretation is a disservice to the next generation of believers.

In addition to Wilson's suggestions, an excellent resource for young children is the Children of God Storybook Bible, by Desmond Tutu. The archbishop's love and understanding of children is revealed in his retelling of 56 stories from the Old and New Testaments. Illustrations by 20 different artists from throughout the world ensure a variety of skin tones. As would be expected in a story Bible, the epistles are not included, but there are four stories from Acts and a final story from Revelation, "The Promise of a New Earth." Best of all, Children of God is available on CDs, read by the author himself in his distinctively delightful voice.

Barry M. Ridge Gratz, Pa.

Thanks for Wilson's helpful review article. Some of the best advice I ever received about children and the

(Continued on page 44)



Healthy cooperation

April 17, 2013

hough most state Republican leaders vowed last year to reject the expansion of Medicaid under Obamacare, several GOP governors have made plans to increase their Medicaid rolls after all. This is very good news. Currently, many states only cover people who fall well below the federal poverty line, leaving uninsured those who are less desperately poor. Obamacare offers states funds to expand coverage to 133 percent of the poverty line—and now some Republicans have decided they can't pass this up. Expanded coverage meets human need, they realize, and fewer uninsured people will mean fewer unpaid hospital bills and more health-care jobs.

Arkansas found its own way to like the expansion. The state asked the Obama administration for permission to buy private insurance for the targeted population instead of enrolling them in Medicaid. The administration agreed—and now other states are adopting this approach. This accommodation appeals to Republicans' preference for relying on the private sector. It also ensures that patients will be able to keep their doctors if their incomes fluctuate, whereas under Medicaid they might go in and out of eligibility depending on income.

Private plans will likely cost taxpayers more than traditional Medicaid does. Still, wider health coverage—whether public or private—is an unquestionably positive thing. It's encouraging to see a Democratic president and Republican state leaders work together toward a shared goal, despite their differences as to the ideal means of getting there. It's a case of caring about results more than ideology.

Still, some GOP leaders continue to oppose the Medicaid expansion on the grounds that it will discourage work and perpetuate a culture of dependency. This fear is unfounded. Most people who would be covered by Medicaid live in households where someone has a job; the problem is that they can't afford insurance.

In fact, it's not the Medicaid expansion that discourages work-it's the stingier status quo. In a typical state, a family of three loses its Medicaid eligibility when its income hits \$11,900—far too little to be able to afford insurance. In that case, often the best available option is to make sure you stay under this

threshold-and don't increase your income—so as to keep Medicaid. Expanding Medicaid coverage would eliminate this perverse incentive.

The U.S. social safety net has evolved

into a system that primarily supports

working families. Yet some persist in raising the specter of people choosing the dole over the workplace. House Republicans recently passed a budget that would make deep cuts to the safety net, including a repeal of all Obamacare spending and \$810 billion in additional Medicaid cuts. Budget chair Paul Ryan said he wants to make sure that able-bodied people aren't depending on the government for their livelihood. What his budget actually does is reduce the benefits that help hardworking people survive.

The Medicaid expansion will help lift people out of poverty without discouraging them from helping themselves. In several states, Republican leaders are putting the welfare of their people over their small-government ideology. Let's hope this pragmatic form of leadership spreads to other states and to Capitol Hill.

Some states are putting people's welfare over ideology.

marks

CHURCH COLLATERAL: With banks in Cyprus on the verge of collapse and the government unable to come to agreement with the European Union over a bailout plan, the head of the Cyprian Orthodox Church offered to help. Archbishop Chrysostomos II offered to mortgage the church's assets to help get the country out of its financial bind. Although the church is believed to be the biggest landholder in the country, it does not have enough assets to bail out Cyprus by itself. The archbishop urged his country's leaders to find solutions within Cyprus, and he was highly critical of the European Union's plans to make bank depositors give up some of their assets. He called on Cypriots to make sacrifices to help pay off the country's debts (ABC News, March 20).

WHO'S GENEROUS? The wealthiest Americans—those in the top 20 per-

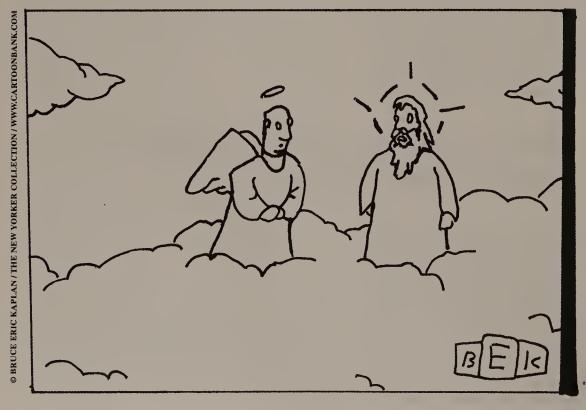
cent—give 1.3 percent of their income to charity; those in the bottom 20 percent give 3.2 percent of their income, even though many of them can't itemize their contributions as a tax deduction. One theory about why the rich give less is because they are more isolated from and therefore have less empathy toward truly needy people. Lower income people may give more because they are more acquainted with the challenges of meeting basic human needs. Rich people tend to give to the arts and education, whereas poorer people tend to give to social service and church organizations (Atlantic, March 20).

ORDINARY LIVING: In a tribute to outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, Stanley Hauerwas said that what Williams taught us is the art of ordinary living. This means giving up notions about grand gestures or heroic

actions. It involves learning to live without fear of the complexity of ordinary life. Williams confessed that he longed for a church that was more true to itself. Yet, said Williams, the art of ordinary living means he "must also learn to live in and attend to the reality of the Church as it is, to do the prosaic things that can be and must be done now and to work at my relations now with the people who will not listen to me ... because what God asks of me is not to live in the future but to live with honesty and attentiveness in the present, i.e., to be at home" (Religion and Ethics, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, March 20).

NEURAL HEALTH: Just as our muscles atrophy with inactivity, our ability to connect with other human beings weakens if we spend too much time alone or engage them only via technologies like smart phones, according to Barbara L. Fredrickson, psychologist at the University of North Carolina, and her team of researchers. Social connection also enhances health. "When you share a smile or laugh with someone face to face, a discernible synchrony emerges between you, as your gestures and biochemistries, even your respective neural firings, come to mirror each other," Fredrickson wrote. "It's micro-moments like these, in which a wave of good feeling rolls through two brains and bodies at once, that build your capacity to empathize as well as to improve your health" (New York Times, March 23).

FOUR-PART HARMONY: Choral music was a major part of the Lutheran Reformation and goes back to Luther himself. He was a competent songwriter and singer, and he saw music as a powerful means of proclaiming the mysteries of God and of moving human hearts.



"I was in the details, and it was boring."

Luther knew that music as an art form has the capacity to bring people together, so he encouraged people to sing together, and in harmony. Luther's ability to join vernacular words with popular song tunes was instrumental in spreading the Reformation among illiterate as well as literate people. Lutheran schools taught children to sing "psalms and songs" and to sing in four parts (*Church History*, March).

PASTOR AS THEOLOGIAN: The separation of theological scholarship from pastoral ministry has led to two unfortunate outcomes, says pastor and writer Gerald Hiestand: the theological anemia of the church and the ecclesial anemia of theology. Hiestand suggests that the pastoral vocation and theological scholarship need to be reunited by resurrecting an almost extinct role: the pastor as ecclesial theologian. Doctoral students in theology could be encouraged to make pastoral ministry the context for their scholarship (*Expository Times*, March).

REVISED EDITION: Albert Schweitzer's The Quest of the Historical Jesus is one of the most important books on biblical theology in the modern period. Many people don't realize that Schweitzer published a greatly revised edition an edition that didn't appear in English until 2000. Theologians in the U.S. often quote a passage from the original text without realizing that Schweitzer excised it in his revision: "the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which [will] bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them." Another famous section, "He comes to us as one unknown," was retained in the revised version (Early Christianity 3 [2012]).

IRAQ, A HARD PLACE: Ten years after the beginning of the Iraq War, Americans remain deeply divided over it: 46 percent say the United States mostly achieved its goals in Iraq, while 43 percent say the war was mostly a failure. Americans also continue to disagree over the invasion of

Spirituality is an emotion. Religion is an obligation. Spirituality soothes. Religion mobilizes. Spirituality is satisfied with itself. Religion is dissatisfied with the world. Religions create aid organizations . . . [T]he largest U.S.-based international relief and development organization is World Vision, a Seattle-based Christian group. ??

 Rabbi David Wolpe on being "spiritual but not religious" (Time.com, March 21)

66 If you don't like someone's story, write your own. ??

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who wrote the classic novel
 Things Fall Apart (1958) about how a tribal society was torn apart
 by colonialism (*New York Times*, March 22). Achebe, who died last
 month, had taught at Bard College and Brown University.

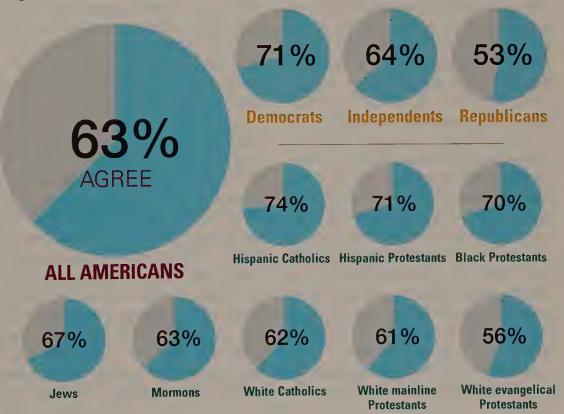
Iraq: 44 percent say it was the wrong decision, 41 percent say it was the right thing to do (Pew Research, March 18).

WOMEN IN HISTORY: When the Washington Post in 1943 tried to come up with a list of the "Ten Outstanding Women of the Modern World," it could name only eight. Three of them were wives of world leaders at the time: Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt; Madame Chiang

Kai-shek, wife of the Chinese nationalist leader; and Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, wife of the King of England George VI. The others were Margaret Mead, American anthropologist; Evie Curie, Marie's daughter; Dorothy Thompson, journalist and foreign correspondent; Sigred Undset, Norwegian writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928; and Louise Boyd, who had made an expedition to Greenland (*History Today*, March 2013).

PATH TO CITIZENSHIP SOURCE: PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A majority of Americans agree that the immigration system **should allow** immigrants already living in the U.S. illegally to become citizens, provided they meet certain requirements.



Translator Orly Noy

From Iran to Israel

ORLY NOY emigrated to Israel from Iran as a child during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. She has worked for All for Peace radio, a station with a staff of Israelis and Palestinians, and she has produced the first translations of modern Iranian novels into Hebrew. Recently she taught Hebrew at the University of South Florida.

Why did your family emigrate to Israel?

It had to do with us being Jewish, of course. My parents always say that they would have done it one day, even if there had not been a revolution in Iran. Somehow I doubt it.

How did you begin translating?

It was completely an accidental thing. About four years ago, I was looking something up on Google, and I typed in "Farsi literature" in Hebrew. Google answered back in Hebrew, "Did you mean Russian literature?" Google did not recognize such a thing as Farsi literature in Hebrew. Google has no sense of humor; it was not joking with me. It just didn't recognize the term.

What did you translate and why?

The natural first choice was My Uncle Napoleon, by Iraj Pezeshkzad. It is probably the most popular modern novel in Farsi literature. It is a social satire written in 1970, before the revolution. A very popular television series in Iran is based on that book, and Iranians know by heart lines from that series. When we left Iran at the beginning of the revolution, my mother actually grabbed a copy of that book in the midst of all the chaos and brought it with her to Israel.

A publisher came to see me about the second book, which was *The Colonel*, by

Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, who is considered one of the best Iranian novelists. He still lives and writes in Iran. His book has actually never been published in Iran or in Farsi, because it is such a critical book. It has been published in German, English and now Hebrew. The book is very dark. It examines what happened as the revolution turned against its own children. It is a story about an ex-colonel in the shah's army whose children took part in various groups that were part of the revolution. All of them paid a dear price. It is eye-opening about what happens to great ideologies when they go bad. In that sense I think it is very relevant book for Israelis.

What makes it relevant?

Israelis and Iranians have much more in common than people think. We are talking about two ancient peoples that, in a way, relive their glorious past and are not able to face their new reality. The lesson is very relevant to Israelis because I think the Zionist movement needs to reexamine its past. What has become of this great ideology and how has it materialized on the ground in Israel?

What has been the response to these translated books in Israel?

I have been thrilled. They both got incredible coverage and a lot of reviews. Of course, they have an element of being exotic. But that's OK—whatever can get Israelis to look at Iranians as human beings who tried to take their destiny into their own hands and make something better for themselves and for their children—though the revolution backfired very badly. It is important to me that Israelis see Iranians not as crazy fanatics threatening to destroy the



world, but as human beings whose attempts to make something better took a very sad direction.

What did you learn about your Iranian heritage from translating?

Immigrants tend to romanticize their homeland, especially if you are in exile and you cannot go back. Translating *The Colonel* rescued me from that romanticizing view. It helped me to face Iran as a very troubled place with a very difficult political and social reality. I always felt 100 percent Iranian and 100 percent Israeli, but this work put more content into my Iranian identity.

What was it like to grow up as an Iranian in Israel?

It was much harder to immigrate from a Muslim country because of the fundamentalist mentality that Israelis have toward Arab and Muslim culture. To leave my Iranian identity and master Hebrew very quickly was a matter of survival. For many years, I blocked as much of my Iranian identity as I could. I wouldn't allow my parents to play Iranian music in the house when my friends came over, for example. As I became older and wiser I reconnected with my Iranian roots.

How does translating connect with your work for peace?

As with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, much of the Israeli-Iranian conflict is driven by ignorance. You need to meet your neighbors and see how they live and deconstruct the superficial image that you have of the "other."

Do you have hope that this is happening?

Strangely enough, I am more hopeful about the Iranian future than the Israeli

one. The Iranians are at least willing to admit there is a problem. They are trying in their limited ways to do something about it. The Israelis are very far from even admitting how deep the problem really is. They have fallen into a very comfortable numbness. They refuse to admit what has become of their ideology,

Zionism. For 65 years, we have not found the way to fulfill it without violating fundamental values of justice, humanity and morality—to the point that we now actually need to choose between a democratic and a Jewish state. The constant hostility toward us in our geopolitical setting has turned us into an isolated country, with

very worrying racist and fascist elements that keep getting stronger. Unable to look bravely in the mirror, the majority of the Israelis blame the entire world, and of course the Palestinians, for our dire reality. Such conduct, unfortunately, doesn't leave much hope for change.

-Amy Frykholm

Why we shouldn't blame video games and movies

What culture of violence?

by Scott Paeth

VIOLENCE SEEMS to be embedded in our DNA. For as long as there have been human beings, there has been violence. Humans are adept at brutality. And for those of us who hope for an end to violence and believe in a God who desires that we beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, the ever-lengthening account of human slaughter and the ever-growing list of victims can be a temptation to despair.

The mass killing of first-graders and their teachers at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, last December may represent a watershed moment in the public perception of violence and the search for solutions to the problem of mass shootings. But the problems of violence extend beyond mass killings like the one at Sandy Hook. In my city of Chicago, the murder rate is topping all past records, with most of the killing taking place in a small number of highcrime, high-poverty neighborhoods. One recent victim was a young woman who had performed at Barack Obama's second inauguration.

As in the past, a great deal of attention is being paid to the idea that we are awash in a "culture of violence," which extends to every sphere of society, including the television shows we watch,

the movies we view, the books we read and the games we play. The condemnation of violent culture is one theme that unites the National Rifle Association's Wayne LaPierre and President Obama, who in a speech in the aftermath of Sandy Hook criticized "a culture that all too often glorifies violence."

The search for causes is understandable. But it is not at all clear that a "culture of violence" is responsible. Violence as a social phenomenon is far too complex to be traced to so amorphous a source or to any single set of causes.

There is no question that we are surrounded in popular media by depictions of violence, from *The Walking Dead* and the *Call of Duty* games to Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained*. Nevertheless, we should be wary of attempting to extrapolate from that fact to the conclusion that the *depiction* of violence can be causally tied to the commission of *actual* violence. The data do not support the idea that the consumption of violent media leads to a greater propensity toward violence. If anything, they point in the opposite direction.

For example, the *New York Times* recently reported on one study that found a correlation between higher violent video game sales and lower rates of violent crime. In addition, violent media

are popular in many other countries that exhibit far less violence than the United States does; if there were a connection between violent media and real-life violence, one would expect there to be a correlation in rates of violence across national boundaries—but there is not. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, factors such as poverty, drugs and involvement in crime are far better predictors of a propensity to actual violence than consumption of violent media.

Interestingly, despite our renewed focus on the problem of violence, it is Inot even clear that it is increasing, despite horrific acts like Sandy Hook. To the contrary, overall violence has declined in the United States over the past five years. Since 2010 it is down 3.8 percent, according to FBI statistics. What has increased has been the incidence of mass shootings. According to Mother Jones magazine, there have been at least 62 mass shootings in the past 30 years. The horror of these acts and the publicity they garner can give the impression that violence overall is on the rise. But this does not appear to be the case. As a society, we

Scott Paeth teaches in the religion department at DePaul University in Chicago.

seem to be getting less violent even as the depiction of violence in media becomes more graphic and realistic.

The focus on violent media allows us to become distracted from examining what the underlying causes and cures of violence might be. It is comforting to think that we can point to a single phenomenon at the root of the motivation to harm and kill. But, as Anthony Burgess would note, human beings are not clockwork oranges. We are not simple machines whose workings can be taken apart, understood and then reconstructed to function better. At the heart of Christian teaching is the realization that we are in some sense fundamentally broken creatures, sinners in need of redemption from a transcendent source. We are mysteries to ourselves, and neither our motivations nor our actions can be well understood if we believe ourselves to be mere mechanisms or creatures governed by conditions of stimulus and response.

Stephen King, who knows something about both the portrayal of violence in media and the way it can feed fatal delusions, writes that media violence can be an accelerant for mass killings. While not itself the cause, it can catalyze the fuel that exists within the troubled imagination of a potential killer. Like gasoline and oily rags, we should strive to keep violent media away from those who might use it as inspiration for actual violence—if only we could figure out who those people are.

But part of the problem here is that all sorts of cultural factors are implicated in people's response to and evaluation of violence. One study found an increase in aggression in people playing violent video games, but it also found a similar increase in people who read a violent Bible story. The researchers in this case were quick to recommend limitations on violent media but reluctant to limit reading the Bible.

A more effective approach, I suspect, would be to contain the potential damage done by the confluence of violent media and violent intentions by depriving the fire of its power to burn. This would entail imposing tighter restrictions on the availability of certain kinds of firearms and ammunition. Universal background checks for weapon purchases, a ban on high-capacity magazines and other limitations on guns would represent a good start, but those would be far from the only reforms necessary.

The connections between poverty, crime and violence are exceptionally strong and underscore the need to address poverty. To begin beating our spears into pruning hooks, we need first to ensure that the fruits of the harvest are available to all. Giving those on the margins of society greater hope in their future will have a greater effect on reducing violence overall than any restriction on violent media will.

A church meets a cloud of witnesses

Discovering the saints

by Benjamin J. Dueholm

IN THE UNDERRATED

film drama *Into Temptation*, a priest preaches to the small, stoic congregation of St. Mary Magdalene on the feast day of a St. Cyril, who lived a life of complete chastity, poverty and sobriety. "It's no wonder the Irish didn't adopt him," Father John jokes. He goes on to mention some of the more obscure saints he's drawn to. Has anyone heard of St. Hubert the Silent or St. Richard the Whoremonger? "I'm not making this up," the priest tells his congregants, to the proverbial sound of crickets chirping.

It's a familiar enough scene to any preacher who has tried to bring the living

witness of the ancient faithful into the historically amnesiac present. So I hesitated when Dawn Mass, my senior colleague, suggested that we devote a tenweek sermon series to some of the prominent saints of church history. My seminary education gave me great love for the patristic and medieval theological worlds, but my pastoral experience has left me wary of trying to make Athanasius's prickliness come alive in a sermon. Would anyone find this interesting? Would it feel like a history lesson?

Yet it was hard to resist. It is often said that Protestants have an "ecclesial deficit," and this is never more evident

than in times of actual or potential schism. For us Lutherans, there is no way to supplement that deficit without embracing our catholic and international heritage beyond and between Paul, Augustine, Luther and modern-day North America. My congregation's tendency—and not its alone, to be sure—has been to confine itself to what Paul Tillich called the "leaping theory of Protestantism," and this needed some filling in.

So we decided to do it. We called the series "This Is My Church." Along with presenting video portraits of our ministries, we would strive to introduce our

congregation (and in some instances ourselves) to the voices who helped make the church we claim as ours.

We set three limits on the series. First, we would stay on the lectionary (to the relief of our music director, who likes to program music thematically in advance). We would be bound by the words and emphases of the readings for every Sunday. Second, we would go in chronological order. Third, we would maintain a reasonable balance between men and women. A fourth went unstated: we would not bore our people with our own historical enthusiasm.

These constraints pushed us deeply into the calendars of commemoration and the lives of the saints. (Philip Pfatteicher's Festivals and Commemorations, Sam Portaro's Brightest and Best and Butler's Lives of the Saints were invaluable, supplemented by individual volumes on people and periods.) As a result, we stretched ourselves and our congregation.

n Reformation Sunday we eschewed Luther and Melanchthon in favor of 16th-century Roman Catholic reformer Bartolomé de las Casas, whose antislavery activism in the New World echoed Jesus' pronouncement, "if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed." All Saints Day is so rarely ancient or international in emphasis when we observe it. But my colleague came to love 17th-century German missionary Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, whose willingness to learn a new language and live outside the European settlement in Tranquebar, India, helped us envision the vast multitude from every nation in the day's reading from Revelation.

Over the weeks of learning and preaching, these distant lives began to feel very contemporary. Perpetua and Felicity, the third-century North African martyrs, defied a death-loving culture. Ninth-century missionary Ansgar strove to bring the gospel to an indifferent or hostile Scandinavia, while doing works of mercy that overcame his many disappointments and setbacks.

The radical servanthood of Elizabeth, a 13th-century Hungarian princess who lived most of her short life in Germany, reflected ironically on contemporary princess culture, just as her mistreatment at the hands of an overbearing spiritual director reflected on the enduring vulnerability of the pious to religious abuse. The apostle Paul broke down worldly barriers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, obscure in his own lifetime, amplified his personal heroism by trying to make Christian sense of a world that no longer needed God.

As we gained companions in the defeats, perplexities, dilemmas and abiding faith that characterize the church in every age, a sense of preacherly fellowship developed between past and present. It didn't hurt that their words were, unsurprisingly, more eloquent than our own.

The incarcerated Perpetua recounts her pagan father's pleading with her to recant her faith. She asks him, "Do you see—for example—this vessel lying here as a little pitcher or as something else?"

"I see it as a little pitcher," he replies.

"Can it be called by any other name than what it is?" she asks. He says no. "Nor can I call myself anything else than what I am," she concludes, "a Christian."

As for Ansgar, claims of miraculous healings were made on his behalf. "Were I worthy of such favor from my God," he responds, perhaps skeptically, "I would ask that he would grant me this one miracle, that by his grace he would make of me a good man."

Søren Kierkegaard, lamenting the dearth of hope in the 19th-century Danish church, proclaims that "he who always hopes for the best grows old, deceived by life, and he who is always prepared for the worst grows old too soon, but he who has faith preserves an eternal youth." I compared Kierkegaard's view of the church to a race in which everyone has agreed to stop running before the finish line. Everyone in church was asked to grasp the hand of someone nearby and to exhort each other to "keep running."

Pastor Dawn ended the series with a sermon on Leymah Gbowee, the Liberian activist who shared the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize with two other women who worked fearlessly to end that country's devastating civil war. She quoted Gbowee's message to the 2012 ELCA

National Youth Gathering, at which 30 of our own youth were present: "The world has heard from King; the world has heard from Mandela; the world has heard from Gbowee." Dawn went on: "We could add, the world has heard from de las Casas; the world has heard from Ziegenbalg; the world has heard from Kierkegaard; the world has heard from Bonhoeffer. Now the world needs to hear from you."

Most gratifying was the congregation's response. They were genuinely excited to have these small parts of their past restored to them. I've long been fascinated by people like Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer, so I should not have been surprised to hear requests for adult education series on them, for more of the insight these lives offer to our own questions and more of the inspiration they give to our own humble efforts to bear witness to Christ and participate in the healing of the world.

We illustrated the series with a map of the world that became populated, week by week, with images of these saints and ribbon (red for the martyrs, gold for the rest) marking their itineraries. This was yet another fancy with an unclear meaning. But I soon learned it had an impact.

At church, messages are occasionally relayed by our "Snow Chuckie"-a kitschy, candy-cane-wielding snowman figurine that looks sinister when a note demanding an overdue annual report is speared on his carrot nose. One evening I was greeted by Chuckie, bearing a different sort of note. "Pastor Benwhere's Ansgar?" the little monster was demanding. Ansgar, the not very successful missionary to Scandinavia, founder of Bremen's first hospital and collector of devotional prayers for each psalm, was recently as unknown in our parish as St. Richard the Whoremonger was in Into Temptation. He had fallen off the map. Someone had noticed.

I promptly printed off a new image of St. Ansgar holding a small church (his Bremen cathedral, I imagine) and his dates. I returned him to the cloud of witnesses that had watched over, preached with and encouraged us all along.

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news

Sources include:
Religion News Service (RNS)
USA Today, other newspapers
Associated Baptist Press (ABP)
denominational news services

How long a papal honeymoon?

News analysis

March 13, Pope Francis has been warmly embraced by his own flock and even by the media and the wider public in a way that his bookish predecessor, Benedict XVI, was not.

Polls show that anywhere from 73 percent to 88 percent of American Catholics say they are happy with the selection of Francis, as opposed to about 60 percent who were happy with the choice of Benedict—and many of those are extremely pleased with the new pope.

Such an effusive welcome is especially good news for Catholic leaders who spent years fending off criticisms about Vatican dysfunction under Benedict and a cloud of scandal and crisis at home. And the impressive start for Francis is also crucial in building up a reservoir of good will that will be needed when the new pope refuses to bend on unpopular teachings or commits a gaffe of his own.

Yet even as the former cardinal Jorge Bergoglio basks in this broad approval as Pope Francis, some constituencies in the Catholic Church are cautious or even angry at his election, and their concern has only grown in the early days of his pontificate.

Chief among the critics are the liturgical traditionalists who reveled in Benedict's exaltation of old-fashioned ways—and are now watching in horror as Francis rejects the extravagant vestments and high-church rituals that were in vogue for the past eight years.

"Of all the unthinkable candidates, Jorge Mario Bergoglio is perhaps the worst," a fellow Argentine wrote in a post at Rorate Caeli, a blog for aficionados of the old Latin mass rites. "It really cannot be what Benedict wanted for the church."

"Something is profoundly wrong when the winds of change can blow so swiftly through an immutable institution of God's own making," agreed Patrick Archbold at Creative Minority Report, another conservative site.

Given that traditionalists are some of the most devoted and vocal Catholics in the church, and that they retain both contacts and influence in the upper ranks of the hierarchy, their pessimism could spell trouble for Francis.

The same could be said of politically conservative Catholics, especially those from the U.S. who have enjoyed access and approval in Rome for decades, under both Benedict and the late John Paul II.



A POPE FOR THE POOR: Pope Francis waves to the crowd in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican. At his March 19 inaugural mass in the square the new pontiff urged the crowd to protect the disadvantaged.

Their' concerns, while expressed in more muted tones, are tied to a number of markers: Francis is a Jesuit, for one thing, and even though he is considered a relatively conservative member of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits are considered notorious by the Catholic right.

Their list of alleged faults is long—they advocate engagement with the world, they have shown a willingness to criticize the hierarchy, and they have embraced a radical commitment to the poor. That last one is a priority for Francis as he sharply critiqued unfettered capitalism and austerity politics, even taking on the name of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the poor.

Indeed, the new pope "would likely be considered too liberal for a prime-time speaking slot at the 2016 [Democratic] convention," Charles Camosy, a theologian at Fordham University in New York, wrote in a *Washington Post* column titled "Republicans have a Pope Francis problem."

St. Francis is also an icon of environmentalism, which the new pope has similarly embraced. That discomfits some conservatives—as does praise for Francis from liberation theologians like Leonardo Boff and Jon Sobrino. Rumors are already afoot that Francis might beatify slain Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed by a right-wing death squad for speaking out against injustice.

Not only that, but Francis allowed Vice President Biden and former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, both Democrats who support abortion rights, to receive communion at his installation mass.

Moreover, while Francis is as orthodox as Benedict on the church's doctrines of sexual ethics, he has shown what is to some a disconcerting willingness to seek pragmatic solutions to difficult issues, such as when he supported civil unions

for gay couples in Argentina in an unsuccessful bid to thwart a gay marriage law.

On the other side of the spectrum, however, some left-wing Catholics are leery of Francis or openly criticize him for what they see as his antagonism to gay rights. They also question his track record on sexual abuse by clergy and his disputed role during Argentina's "Dirty War" in the 1970s, when, some say, he was not sufficiently vocal in speaking out against the military junta.

"The election of a doctrinally conservative pope, even one with the winning simplicity of his namesake, is especially dangerous in today's media-saturated world where image too often trumps substance," the feminist theologian Mary E. Hunt wrote at Religion Dispatches.

"A kinder, gentler pope who puts the weight of the Roman Catholic hierarchical church behind efforts to prevent divorce, abortion, contraception, samesex marriage—as Mr. Bergoglio did in his country—is . . . scary," Hunt said.

By contrast, mainstream Catholics, and Catholic Democrats in particular, have welcomed Francis's election not only because of his appealing common touch but also because his statements on behalf of the poor may hold out a chance for leveling the playing field in the church's internal culture wars.

The new pope's words about fighting economic exploitation and "being a poor church, for the poor" are so insistent that they could put the church's social justice teachings back on par with its doctrines on abortion and sexual ethics, which have been so prominent for so long that some complain they outweigh any other tenets.

Still, even Catholic progressives could wind up disappointed as Francis begins to unveil his appointments and policies, just as traditionalists and conservatives could be cheered or at least reassured that all is not lost.

As James Keenan, a Boston College theologian, says, the Jesuits have an unwritten rule that a new superior should spend the first 100 days of his office learning about the community before making any changes. That means, some observers say, the critics need to make their voices heard now, because the clock is ticking. —David Gibson, RNS

Melissa Rogers picked for Obama's faith-based office

Church-state expert Melissa Rogers will be the new director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. Rogers succeeds Joshua DuBois, who left the office in February after serving throughout President Obama's first term.

"I'm honored to be able to serve President Obama by forging and promoting a wide range of effective partnerships with faith-based and secular nonprofits that help people in need," Rogers said in a statement March 13.

Rogers is already well acquainted with the office she will direct. She chaired the office's first advisory council and spearheaded the work to reform the office. In 2010, President Obama signed an executive order reflecting recommendations from the council that called for greater transparency and clearer rules for religious

groups that receive federal grants.

"Melissa has been a stalwart advocate for religious freedom," said DuBois, who noted her key roles in the creation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act—prominent religious freedom statutes.

DuBois, who served as a spiritual as well as a political adviser to President Obama, noted Rogers's Baptist ties and roles as a laywoman in her local congregation volunteering in its food pantry and nursery.

Colleagues from a range of religious organizations welcomed Rogers's appointment. "Melissa has a sincere sensitivity to the different beliefs and points of view that people or entire communities may hold on delicate and, frankly, 'hot button' issues," said Nathan Diament, executive director of public policy for the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, who served on the advisory council with Rogers.

Shaun Casey, an ethics professor at Wesley Theological Seminary and former faith adviser to President Obama's campaign, said he expects Rogers's expertise could help the White House address the ongoing concerns of critics about faith-based organizations receiving government funding and hiring staffers based on religion. "It's logical to assume it will be on her radar screen," he said

Rogers comes to the post after serving in several positions at the intersection of religion and public policy. Most recently she directed Wake Forest Divinity School's Center for Religion and Public Affairs and was a nonresident senior fellow at Washington's Brookings Institution.

She previously was executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, a board member of the Public Religion Research Institute and the general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

J. Brent Walker, director of the Baptist Joint Committee, called her a "perfect choice" for the position.

"Melissa is an honest broker, a consensus-builder and a problemsolver," added Joel Hunter, a Florida evangelical leader, and Rabbi David Saperstein, a Reform Jewish official, in a joint column in the Washington Post's "On Faith."

Hunter and Saperstein, who served on the advisory council with Rogers, noted that she has been "a key leader in countless common ground projects," including a recent document on public religious expression whose drafters had worked from a range of perspectives—from the conservative American Center for Law and Justice to the liberal American Civil Liberties Union.

C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance and a longtime critic of the faith-based office, expressed confidence in Rogers's ability to tackle thorny issues, including the debate on hiring.

"I know of no individual better suited to oversee this important endeavor, with sensitivity to the competing views and priorities at play, and with great integrity, than Melissa Rogers," Gaddy said. —Adelle M. Banks, RNS



Melissa Rogers

Delayed marriage leading to increased number of out-of-wedlock births

First comes baby, then comes marriage? That is the new norm for many middle-class young Americans—and they and their children are paying a price, says a new report.

With 48 percent of first births now outside of marriage, "today's unmarried twentysomething moms are the new teen mothers," says the report, released March 20 by the National Marriage Project, the Relate Institute and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

The report says reviving cultural support for earlier marriage may be part of the solution, but some experts question that approach.

The National Marriage Project, based at the University of Virginia, has been sounding alarms about the growing disconnect between marriage and parenthood for a while. But the report is the first to make clear that a "tipping point" has been reached for many Americans in the middle class—those who have at least a high school education but no college degree, says Bradford Wilcox, the sociologist who directs the project.

Among young women with high school diplomas, 58 percent of first births are now outside marriage, the report says. For high school dropouts it's 83 percent; for college-educated women it's 12 percent. The report notes that 54 percent of young women are high school graduates; 37 percent are college graduates.

Overall, the median marriage age is now 27 for women, 29 for men. But the median age at which a woman has her first baby is 26, the report says.

Young people delay marriage to finish their educations, launch their careers and try to achieve economic security. Marriage is "something they do after they have all their other ducks in a row," according to the report. In general, the delay works out well for college-educated young people who also delay having children, it adds.

The benefits of delayed marriage can

include higher incomes for women and lower divorce rates, it notes. But there also are costs for young people, says Wilcox: "The ones who are married have more life satisfaction."

For children, the cost of having unmarried parents can be instability. According to the report, 39 percent of young unmarried parents who start out living together break up before their child is five years old; just 13 percent of married parents split so soon. Such upheaval hurts children, many studies have found.

The report suggests several remedies, including economic and education policy shifts that will make financial stability attainable for more young people. But it also says some who might otherwise marry are now being discouraged by parents, friends and popular culture.

"The broader culture should respect the choice of twentysomethings to marry, especially those who have reached their mid-twenties, provided that they are in a good relationship," the report says.

But marriage "may not be such a good deal" for less-educated couples, says Susan Brown, codirector of the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. "We do know that people with lower levels of education who get married are more likely to get divorced."

Brown, who did some of the research cited in the report but did not help write it, adds that "one of the biggest predictors of divorce is financial instability." So, she says, young people putting off marriage for financial reasons may have good reason.

"The ones who are not marrying are the ones who don't have the job prospects, don't have the economic stability," says Stephanie Coontz, cochair of the nonprofit Council on Contemporary Families. They also may have other problems unrelated to marriage that help explain why unmarried young people are generally less satisfied with life, she says.

But young people who are careful about marriage may not be as careful about having babies, Coontz adds. "We should focus on the idea of postponing children until you are ready to provide a stable environment, whether that's a stable single, married or cohabiting environment."

Report coauthor Kelleen Kaye, senior director of research at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, says her group is working on efforts to help single women in their twenties delay having children. Right now, 69 percent of pregnancies in that group are unplanned, she says.

One program, she says, reaches out to community college students. "Our message isn't that all twentysomethings should run out and get married," she says. "We are saying just think about the most successful way to launch your family." —Kim Painter, USA Today

GOP senator changes his view on gay marriage

Republican Sen. Rob Portman of Ohio has reversed his longtime opposition to same-sex marriage after reconsidering the issue because his 21-year-old son, Will, is gay.

Portman, 57, said his son, a junior at Yale University, told his wife, Jane, and him that he's gay, and "it was not a choice, it was who he is and that he had been that way since he could remember."

Rob Portman, the first GOP senator to support gay marriage, said, "It allowed me to think of this issue from a new perspective, and that's of a Dad who loves his son a lot and wants him to have the same opportunities that his brother and sister would have."

The conversation the Portmans had with their son two years ago led him to consult clergy members, friends—including former vice president Dick Cheney, whose daughter is gay—and the Bible.

"The overriding message of love and compassion that I take from the Bible, and certainly the Golden Rule, and the fact that I believe we are all created by our maker—that has all influenced me in terms of my change on this issue," Portman said, adding that he feels that "in a way, this strengthens the institution of marriage."—RNS

The Bible producers deny its Satan resembles President Obama

The producers of the History Channel's *The Bible* have fended off claims that the actor who plays Satan in the miniseries resembles President Barack Obama.

Executive producers Mark Burnett, who created *Survivor*, and his wife, the actress Roma Downey, described the comparisons as "utter nonsense."

"Both Mark and I have nothing but respect and love for our president, who is a fellow Christian. False statements such as these are just designed as a foolish distraction to try and discredit the beauty of the story of the Bible," according to a March 18 statement from Downey, who starred in the television show *Touched by an Angel*.

Mohamen Mehdi Ouazanni, the Moroccan actor who portrays Satan, has played satanic roles prior to his work on *The Bible*, the statement said. The social media sphere blew up March 17 with the comparison, which was touted by conservative commentator Glenn Beck, among others.

"Anyone else think the Devil in *The Bible* Sunday on History Channel looks exactly like That Guy?" Beck tweeted along with a picture of Ouazanni in costume. Beck followed up the next day telling the media to relax. He said the similarity was "funny, nothing more."

The History Channel also sought to dampen the controversy. "History Channel has the highest respect for President Obama," the channel said in its statement. "The series was produced with an international and diverse cast of respected actors. It's unfortunate that anyone made this false connection. History's *The Bible* is meant to enlighten people on its rich stories and deep history," it continued.

The five-part miniseries has raked in huge TV ratings since its beginning. According to Nielsen, 10.9 million people tuned in to watch on March 17, making it the most watched show on TV that night. —Caleb K. Bell, RNS



CANTERBURY RITUAL: With Prince Charles and Camilla, duchess of Cornwall, looking on, Justin Welby struck his pastoral staff three times on the door of the ancient Canterbury Cathedral, seeking admission to assume his throne in a ceremony March 21 that mixed age-old pageantry with contemporary praise and worship songs. As the new archbishop of Canterbury, Welby, 57, is spiritual leader to nearly 80 million Anglicans around the world. The former oil executive faces a monumental challenge: helping the Anglican Communion stay together amid profound differences over theology, gender and sexuality. Welby told the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly that he intends to promote reconciliation as a top priority, having already created a new director of reconciliation post at Lambeth Palace.

Episcopal bishops agree not to help breakaway churches

The Episcopal Church has a new commandment for its bishops: thou shalt not assist former Episcopalians who are trying to take the church's assets.

Church leaders have reached an agreement with nine bishops who had supported breakaway congregations in Texas and Illinois court cases. Courts have been sorting out who controls properties and other assets when congregations leave the denomination.

Under the terms, the nine bishops "express regret for any harm" to the dioceses of Quincy, Illinois, and Fort Worth, Texas, as a result of their actions, which included filing amicus briefs that were sympathetic to the breakaway groups.

The bishops also pledged to stop sup-

porting breakaway groups in court cases, at least until the church's General Convention addresses the matter in 2015. They also agree to help defray costs incurred by the church in reaching the accord.

The accord is billed as an outcome of "conciliation," which is a step in the church disciplinary process. But tensions remain unresolved.

Conciliation "doesn't achieve full reconciliation," said Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori. "It is a step in that direction."

The Episcopal Church has lost hundreds of congregations over the past decade as conservatives left in protest of new blessings for gay bishops and samesex couples, among other issues. As congregations have departed and ensuing property disputes have landed in court, bishops from dioceses that are not involved in the litigation have sometimes weighed in to help interpret church rules and organizational structures.

The bishops who signed the accord did

not admit to any misconduct or wrongdoing, according to a recent blog post by Bishop Daniel Martins of Springfield, Illinois. Nor are the named bishops content with the disciplinary process.

"All nine of us are processing some degree of anger and are feeling substantially alienated from those who brought the charges against us," he wrote. "We feel manipulated and victimized. We are nowhere near happy about this outcome, even though we stand by our decision to accept the accord."

Church leaders were briefed on the accord during the House of Bishops' recent meeting in North Carolina. They received the report with minimal questions and didn't focus on it during the retreat, according to Bishop Todd Ousley of Eastern Michigan.

Signatories to the accord, meanwhile, have no plans to reconsider what they've told the courts.

"We have made our point about the polity of our church in Texas and Illinois courts. Those points are now matters of public record," Martins said in his March 10 blog post. "There is no more reason for us to intervene as we did to protect the truth about [the Episcopal Church's] polity and interests of our own dioceses."

Five of the nine bishops named in the accord are retired.—G. Jeffrey MacDonald, RNS

Syrian refugee crisis hits neighboring countries

AFTER TWO YEARS of civil war, the Syrian refugee crisis is reaching a boiling point. The United Nations estimates that 2.3 million Syrians are displaced within Syria and that another million have fled to Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt according to Daryl Byler, a Middle Eastern representative of the Mennonite Central Committee.

The refugees flee to escape violence, mayhem and lack of housing and infrastructure. In the case of women and girls, rampant rape by armed men is also a cause for flight. Over 75 percent of the Syrian refugees in Jordan are women and children. Many of the refugees have been traumatized as a result of the conflict.

The efforts of UN and other relief agencies are hampered greatly by chaotic political developments.

On the weekend of March 23–24, the U.S.-backed Syrian opposition leader Moaz Khatib, a moderate Islamist who has championed national reconciliation, resigned his position, according to the Los Angeles Times and other news agencies. Meanwhile, the government of Lebanon collapsed, at least in part over the turmoil in neighboring Syria despite the outgoing prime minister's attempt to keep the government neutral. Lebanon's two major political camps are on opposite sides of the Syrian war.

About 30 percent of the refugees who flee Syria settle in refugee camps, at least temporarily. Most of the rest

become urban refugees, usually living in cramped facilities and sometimes in squalor.

Jordan, a country of 6.5 million, many of whom fled other conflicts in the region and include Palestinians and Iraqis, contains more than 400,000 Syrian refugees. On average more than 2,100 Syrians cross the border into Jordan each night. Sometimes they are attacked by Syrian soldiers.

The Jordan army picks up these refugees at the border in buses and transports them to the Za'atari Refugee Camp, six miles from the Syrian border. If they can find a Jordanian citizen to sponsor them, they may leave the camp. Otherwise, they must stay in the camp, which is patrolled by Jordanian security forces. The camp has become so large, and its resources are so minimal, that most of the refugees do not live within walking distance of schools or medical facilities, officials say.

The high altitude desert where the camp is located is cold and wet in the winter. Summers are hot and can produce sandstorms.

"The influx of refugees is straining Jordan's budget and infrastructure and, in some cases, increasing social tensions between the refugees and Jordanian host communities," said Byler. The large influx of Syrians in urban areas is driving up rents and food costs and driving down low-end wages, he said.

Tensions between the host country and the refugees led Caritas Jordan to

add a peace-building element to its work. The humanitarian organization is training teams of Syrian refugees and Jordanians to seek nonviolent means of resolving conflicts.

When President Obama visited Jordan briefly in March, he promised King Abdullah that he would ask the U.S. Congress for more aid for Jordan to help with the refugee crisis. Via the UN \$1.4 billion of aid was promised in January to countries dealing with Syrian refugees. The challenge, officials say, is to get countries that made these pledges to follow through.

As bad as things are in Jordan, Andrea Koppel, vice president of Global Engagement and Policy for Mercy Corps, said the situation is worse in Lebanon. The number of refugees who have flooded the country is roughly equivalent to 20 percent of the population. Lebanon has not established any refugee camps. There is widespread price gouging, Koppel said.

For security reasons, NGOs working with displaced Syrians within Syria are reluctant to talk about their work. However, Michael Young, regional director of the Middle East International Rescue Committee, said one sign of hope is the fact that Syrians have a very robust civic life.

Yet one relief official said she could not counter the lament of a refugee in the Za'atari Refugee Camp: "How will we be a country? We have nothing, nothing to go back to." —Richard A. Kauffman

Gordon Cosby, 95, pioneer in missional thinking

Gordon Cosby, the founder of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., and a pioneering Christian activist whose ministry foreshadowed both the missional and emergent church movements, died March 20 at 95.

Cosby died at Christ House, which provides medical care to Washington's homeless—one of several ministries initiated by the Church of the Saviour, a church which Cosby and his wife, Mary, started with seven other members in 1947.

Born in Lynchburg, Virginia, Cosby grew up attending Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church there, and at age 15 met his wife when her father, Ernest Campbell, became the church's pastor. The same year, he began preaching to a black congregation in a one-room church outside of town, and four years later he enrolled at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

In 1942, seminary completed, Cosby enlisted in the U.S. Army and served as a chaplain in Europe for the rest of World War II. He later told the *Washington Post* that he returned "feeling that denomination and race were artificial constructs and that people should live in regular life as they would in war—willing to lay down their lives for their neighbors, viewing their faith as an urgent tool to change the world."

That faith perspective launched the Church of the Saviour in Washington's Adams Morgan neighborhood. Cosby remained there until he retired in 2009. The *Post* said the church had no pews, no Sunday school or Christmas services.

"He wrote no books," said Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the Reformed Church in America, who, working on Capitol Hill in his twenties, regarded Cosby as his mentor. "He changed my life," said Granberg-Michaelson, now a leading figure in interreligious dialogues.

Elizabeth O'Connor, a longtime church member, wrote several books about Cosby, starting with *Call to Commitment*, published in the 1960s. Cosby taught followers to integrate two jour-

neys: an inward one of growth in love of God, self and others and an outward one to mend creation.

After 1994, the Church of the Saviour became a "scattered community" of nine congregations, each independently structured but sharing common values.

The membership process includes participating in a mission group and classes in the church's School of Christian Living, as well as joining the community in worship. Annually, after a period of intentional discernment, all members renew—or withdraw—their covenantal membership.

Just before his 90th birthday, Cosby told a group of students from Baylor University's School of Social Work that Christians must maintain a keen awareness of situations in their communities. "We want to care about the people Jesus cared about, the least of these, and give them a chance," he said. —ABP, added sources

New bells to ring out at Notre Dame Cathedral

For generations, France's best-known cathedral has been ringing in masses and Christian holidays with what some people unkindly called the most discordant bells in Europe.

Now, the ear-deafening clangs from Notre Dame Cathedral are being replaced by a newly minted set of bells that will peal out to mark the 850th anniversary of the celebrated Paris landmark.

Weighing in at a massive 23 tons, the nine new bells harken back to Notre Dame's original chimes, which were destroyed during the French Revolution.

"The idea of this project was to recreate a set of bells that were as great as the ones existing before the revolution," said Paul Bergamo, head of the Cornille Havard bell foundry in Normandy, which cast eight of the smaller bells in the new set. "Not to re-create an old-style set, but a 21st-century set of bells," he said.

The largest of the new bells, the "great bell" Marie, was cast in the Netherlands.

Only one of Notre Dame's original ten bells has survived. First installed in 1686, 13-ton Emmanuel is the largest of



RINGING OUT ANEW: The bell Anne-Geneviève was displayed during the February exhibition of new bells for Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

the gargantuan chimes. It has rung out for coronations and to mark the endings of the two world wars.

Emmanel's four later counterparts from the 19th century have been mocked as having rendered deaf Quasimodo, Victor Hugo's famous hunchback of Notre Dame. Bergamo is more diplomatic.

"You can always find worse bells," he said of the old ones. "If they were for a medium-sized church lost in the country-side, maybe they could be acceptable. But not for the first church of France."

Replacing them has been no small feat, complicated by a 1905 law separating church and state, which makes the bells the property of the French government and not the Roman Catholic Church.

"That's probably why it took so long to decide to replace the bells—they were not a top state priority," Bergamo said. "When a bell is cracked, you have no other choice but to cast a new one. But it's difficult to make people understand this is useful when a bell is just bad."

Four of the old bells are now in Bergamo's foundry as officials decide what to do with them. Notre Dame officials have refused requests from dozens of cultural organizations to adopt them, noting that they are not church property. "They rang for the freedom of Paris in 1945," Bergamo said. "They don't ring well, they're not beautiful, but they're part of history." —Elizabeth Bryant, RNS

The Word

Sunday, April 21John 10:22–30

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN challenged by the lectionary readings for this Sunday. Although both Psalm 23 and John refer to Jesus the Shepherd and us as sheep, I live in New York City, and as far as I can tell, even the Sheep Meadow in Central Park has no sheep. Yet we sing Psalm 23 each year on this Sunday and at countless other times in convalescent homes and at gravesides. We claim "the Lord is my shepherd" often—and not only in the poetry of this psalm.

It's an enduring image, one that's been captured perhaps millions of times in our art, our liturgy, our stories. Why? For one thing, the image is used throughout scripture, not just in the Psalms and in John.

Yahweh is a shepherd who leads Israel like a flock. Jacob gave praise to the God who shepherded him (Gen. 48). This Shepherd-God led the enslaved out of Egypt and guided them in the wilderness (Ps. 78). Ezekiel, contrasting the faithfulness of God with the leaders who forsook the exiles when Israel was laid waste and thousands were deported, proclaims God's promise: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed ... bind up the injured ... strengthen the weak"—which is exactly what God did, unlike the rulers, the "killer shepherds" who fed themselves, exploited the sheep and deserted the flock (Ezek. 34).

In the New Testament, Jesus is the Shepherd sent to welcome a little flock into the reign of God, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and the leaders of the fledgling flock are commissioned to feed and tend the sheep (John 21). It is no wonder that in many ordination rites the exhortation from 1 Peter rings out: "Tend the flock of God that is your charge . . . not under compulsion but willingly . . . not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2–3). Paul urges presbyters to "Keep watch over . . . all the flock . . . the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son" (Acts 20:28). It is a matter of following Christ, the Shepherd.

Sheep and shepherds are all over scripture, but the images don't do much for many of us. They linger for a while around December 25, when we listen to the message and pay a call on a new family staying in a stable. The sheep are mute creatures that do what they're told to do (so I've been told); they don't lead, they follow, and if they don't follow, a dog nearby keeps them in line.

We don't like being led around by the nose. We might have a healthy respect for authority, but we can do without a dog nipping at our heels. And to some Christians, the bishop's crosier, shaped like a shepherd's crook, only brings to mind its original purpose: to keep the wayward in line.

Those of us who see sheep only on Christmas cards and have never known a shepherd may have trouble making sense of these images. But I urge all of us: don't surrender the symbols of scriptures too soon. Remember that God has spoken to us most often in exactly such images, in signs we can sense and see and hear and touch and taste and smell. These signs work mysteriously on our minds and souls. They suggest more than they can clearly define or describe, pregnant with a depth of meaning that is evoked rather than stated: a temple, a cross, a bronze serpent, Moses, Jesus, a lost son or a lost sheep. Don't give those up. This is how God speaks to us. Biblical language speaks to us just as painting and poetry, sculpture and architecture, music and dancing speak to us.

Don't shake off this image simply because there are no sheep in the Sheep Meadow in Central Park. God is still trying to tell us something. Instead, take the image out of ancient Palestine, shake it, stir it, work it over and let it work on you.

Today we are reminded that the shepherd beyond all shepherds is Jesus. To be sure, others are called shepherds—pastors and bishops, counselors and rulers. But they are only shepherds in how they resemble him. And what is the main characteristic of this Good Shepherd?

Care. Thank God, he cares. He could have left us to ourselves, but he took on our flesh, grew in it, faced temptation in it and died in the most extraordinary act of love in human history—not only for sheep like us who behaved, but for each solitary one who wandered (and wanders) off. He doesn't beat that wanderer with his crosier. He lays him or her on his shoulders, brings the person home and throws a party.

This shepherd cares for all his flock, but also for you and me as unique individuals called to live in this shepherd's flock forever. This shepherd calls us by name, knows us more intimately than we know ourselves, knows it's tough being a creature of flesh and blood, spirit, intelligence and freedom. No matter how far we stray, this shepherd will track us down, cradle us in his arms and bring us home gently on his shoulder.

Follow this Good Shepherd, return his love. Care as this Shepherd cares, open your arms wide to those who need your compassion and love. Help make the world a sheep meadow.

Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, April 28
John 13:31–35

THE PEOPLE IN an Ohio county were angry with the area's red foxes because they had eaten some of the people's domestic chickens and many of the wild quail. So 600 men, women and children formed a circle five miles across, walked through the woods and frightened the foxes out into the open by shouting. Inside of a shrinking circle the foxes ran about in panic, exhausting themselves. One fox would stop to snarl; another would try to lick the hand of its attacker. None were spared. Killing became a sport, and all of the foxes were clubbed to death. As the circle closed, the remaining foxes, not knowing what else to do, lay down to die.

There is no shortage of circles of destruction and death. But suddenly, into this culture of death, came an announcement: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another."

Today's reading tells us where the Christian begins and ends and where the church finds its purpose: not with condemnation but with love. It's a commandment. It's a gift. And it's new.

It may strike us as strange that love can be commanded. But my Lutheran understanding of the law-gospel dialectic

reminds me that we Christians have a covenant with Christ that is sealed with his blood. If we are to live as a chosen people, there are certain stipulations we have to observe, certain obligations that we must fulfill. From the Ten Commandments, for example, that we know what

we are forbidden to do if we want to be in covenant, if we are to be faithful to God. Don't worship false gods, don't skip church, don't take another's life, don't play fast and loose with sex, don't take what doesn't belong to you, don't speak ill of another, don't lust. Don't.

But the don'ts are not at the center of Christianity. It's what every don't points to that's key, and every don't points to an activity that is the other side of Christianity's most precious coin; either the activity is a threat to love, or it is the reverse of love or a refusal of love. Often the don't activity brings love out of the clouds, puts flesh and blood on the skeleton and brings love alive. We see this refusal to love throughout the Gospels: the priest who sees the half-dead victim and ignores him; Judas selling Jesus for 30 pieces of silver; Peter denying that he knows Jesus; Herod beheading John the Baptist to please a dancing girl; the Sadducees trying to catch Jesus in a contradiction; the scribes and Pharisees who neglect justice and mercy.

What makes these actions sins is ultimately that they are refusals to love.

The key to understanding this love is understanding the motivation. It is not something we *have* to do, but something we *get* to do. It is a gift. You don't acquire it by human effort, by wanting it, by being the best you can be through your own efforts. It comes from God through Jesus to those who believe in him. Its source is Jesus; you can have such love only because Jesus loves you, only because his love was so all-embracing that he laid down his life for you, gave his life to you and to me.

But how is this command new? After all, the people of Israel were commanded to love their neighbors and even the alien dwelling among them (Lev. 19:18, 34). It's new because it's part of the new covenant, the basic, fundamental relationship between Christ and his sisters and brothers. So intimate is this love, so striking, that in Jesus' mind it should command the world's attention. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Everyone.

God and humans, the partners in this new covenant, are not separated by radical inequality. Rather, God has become our brother in Jesus Christ, and the love we have for Jesus is the love we now share with our sisters and brothers.

This love gives me hope. I often see it in action—in the response of countless people to the storm-ravaging destruction

Each of us in the body of Christ has pent-up love struggling to burst forth.

of Hurricane Sandy; in congregational ministries to battered, abused women and girls; in the efforts to address gun violence.

We are learning to love, and that gives reason for hope. Each of us in the body of Christ has so much pent-up love struggling and yearning to burst forth. And time is desperately short. We sense it all around us: poverty in the richest country in the world, violent deaths, racism. We dare not do nothing while we wait for the day when all creation will be freed from imperfection, when God will wipe every tear from the eyes of everyone.

We follow Jesus, the Lord of life, the source of forgiveness and the fountain of hope. We have promised to follow him and be guided by him. By his love we will be able to remove those circles of destruction and death.

The author is Robert Rimbo, who is bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

'Letter from Birmingham Jail' at 50

MLK's manifesto

by Robert Westbrook

FIFTY YEARS AGO, in June 1963, the CHRISTIAN CENTURY found itself near the center of American public debate when it was the first large-circulation magazine to publish the full text of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The letter would shortly thereafter stand as the manifesto of those King led in pursuing African-American civil rights in the mid-1960s by means of nonviolent direct action. And it eventually assumed pride of place alongside Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" as a touchstone for the theory and practice of civil disobedience in American protest politics.

King composed the letter in a jail cell in the midst of the bitter struggle to desegregate public accommodations in Birmingham, Alabama—the dark heart of southern racism, the "Johannesburg of America." He and other organizers in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference had arrived in Birmingham in March 1963 on the heels of a campaign in Albany, Georgia, that had failed to put much of a dent in segregation in that small city. There an astute sheriff, Laurie Pritchett, had deflected their efforts with a cool head, orderly arrests and an abundance of prearranged jail space. The SCLC and its local allies in Birmingham, led by Baptist minister Fred Shuttlesworth, hoped for better results, confident that they could provoke Eugene "Bull" Connor, that city's brutal commissioner of public safety, into the sort of spectacle of bigoted violence that Pritchett had carefully avoided—one that would shine a media spotlight on their struggle and win support from hesitant liberals. As King put it in the letter, "We would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community."

But for weeks Connor failed to take the bait, and the movement had difficulty recruiting volunteers to violate segregationist statutes and suffer arrest and imprisonment. Criticism rained down on its head from the Kennedy administration and others, including many black leaders in Birmingham, who counseled patience and an avoidance of confrontation. With the protest faltering, King decided that he himself should get arrested to dramatize the cause.

On Good Friday, April 12, he led a march that violated an injunction that the city had won against such protests. Connor's policemen roughly tossed him and his close friend and movement colleague Ralph Abernathy into a paddy wagon and carted them off to jail and solitary confinement.

Shortly after King was arrested, eight of Alabama's promi-

nent religious leaders—two Episcopal bishops, two Methodist bishops, the pastor of the leading white Baptist church in Birmingham, a leader of the Alabama Presbyterian churches, a Catholic bishop of the diocese that included Birmingham, and a prominent Reform rabbi—published a statement, a "Call for Unity," in the *Birmingham News* attacking the civil rights campaign in the city as "unwise and untimely" and a provocation to hatred and violence. Citing the hope for a negotiated settlement circulating among moderates following Connor's defeat in a recent mayoral election by the more genteel segregationist Albert Boutwell, the clergymen praised law enforcement officials for their restraint and appealed "to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense."

King read this statement in a copy of the newspaper smuggled into his cell by an associate. In controlled fury, he began to craft a letter of reply in its margins and then on paper smuggled into his cell.

Although the letter was ostensibly addressed to the Alabama clergymen, King's target was a much wider audience of white moderates (including the president of the United States, John F. Kennedy) who counseled law-abiding fortitude and gradualism. (He never actually sent it to the eight religious leaders.) The letter was a powerful indictment of the shortcomings of timid moderation in the face of injustice, a sermon of chastisement—a shrewd, tough-minded, even militant political document. It was the work, that is, not of King the "dreamer" of racial unity, whom we find at the center of posthumous commemoration, but of the King too often forgotten: the agitator, the prophet of potentially liberating confrontation and conflict.

s the remarkable work of historian David Chappell has demonstrated, southern white moderates such as the eight clergymen were pivotal to the political strategy of the civil rights movement. King and other leaders of the movement had carefully analyzed their opponents, and whereas the view from the north of southern race relations was often one of a monolithic structure of white supremacy, they knew otherwise. Jim Crow was rife with fissures, and they moved to drive wedges into these cracks that they hoped would make the seemingly solid walls of segregation quake and crumble. King, as Chappell says in *Inside Agitators* (1994), saw three

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types of southerners: "extreme segregationists who were willing to fight; middle-roaders who favored segregation but would sooner see it destroyed than take personal risks to defend it; and the tiny minority who would, with varying degrees of caution, support action to undermine segregation."

Faced with this landscape, the movement pursued a strategy that inextricably mixed moral suasion and coercive politics. It sought out the conscience of the tiny third group and targeted the practical concerns of the much larger second group—those "who, without any moral commitment, found themselves compelled to

break with the segregationists in order to restore social peace, a good business climate, or the good name of their city in the national headlines." Again and again, in Birmingham and elsewhere, battles turned on "the ability of the segregationist leadership to hold the white community's allegiance throughout a

long siege" and on the ability of the movement successfully to conduct a long siege that would disrupt white unity.

Resolute southern segregationists were plagued therefore not only by black demonstrators in the streets, but by unreliable moderate allies sitting on stools in whites-only lunch counters and in pews in whites-only churches. As Chappell demonstrates in A Stone of Hope (2004), segregationists came up short in winning the firm allegiance of this constituency. And this rift in white solidarity "is a key to understanding how black protestors beat them. Segregationists outspent, outvoted, and outgunned the black protestors. But the black protestors found the segregationists' weak points."

The southern churches were a particularly important stronghold of white moderation, and hence a particularly important weak point for segregationist mobilization. To a considerable degree, the fight for civil rights in the South rested on the relative success that white segregationists and their opponents had in mobilizing for their side the emotional resources of southern evangelical Protestantism. The mass meetings and demonstrations of the black movement were, for many, conversion experiences, reflections of a religious fervor that the segregationists could not match. Even worse for the white supremacist cause, the extremists found themselves unable to count on much support from southern religious leaders.

Movement spokesmen and northern critics such as the editors of the Christian Century condemned white southern Christians for sitting on their hands, but so too did extreme segregationists. The eight clergymen to whom King addressed

> the letter had been among the Alabama clergy who in January 1963 had issued a statement (published in the CENTURY) criticizing Governor George Wallace for state's schools. In good moderate

For a review of Jonathan Rieder's Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the threatening to refuse to abide by Struggle That Changed a Nation, see p. 36 court decisions desegregating the fashion, they made it clear that it was the governor's means and not necessarily his ends that

they opposed. "It is understood," they carefully stated, "that those who strongly oppose desegregation may frankly and fairly pursue their convictions in the courts, and in the meantime should peacefully abide by the decisions of those same courts." Such circumspect positions earned the clergymen the ire not only of the civil rights movement but of firm segregationists. And the latter were not above death threats.

In a CENTURY article on the silence of the southern churches, a quotation from one Alabama Baptist minister acutely summed up the moderates' dilemma: "The problem is how to lead without being appropriated by one or the other extremes which immediately destroys the effectiveness of your leadership. When thus appropriated, you are effective only with the one faction. Neither the opposite one nor the moderate group will listen to you any longer." This politics of appropriation was a pivotal feature of the racial politics of the early 1960s. Death threats were not the métier of Martin Luther King Jr. But he did set out to convert or, failing that, to pressure or to neutralize white moderates by demolishing their arguments, shaming their consciences and, not least, threatening their interests.

ments of the moderates. Often praised for its moral philosophy, it is also a masterful work of strategic thinking. As sociologist Jonathan Rieder observes in his new book on the letter, *Gospel of Freedom*, King strikes a number of poses in it, swinging between "diplomatic" and "prophetic" modes of address. But his overriding posture might, I think, be termed one of mock moderation, that is, a stance that put pay to the thinking of moderates by arguing against them in the very "patient and reasonable terms" that they fetishized. Here and there ironic barbs and flashes of overt indignation suggest the difficulties that King had in maintaining this stance. Yet it was one well chosen for the audience he imagined, hoisting them with their own petard.

King began by addressing the clergymen's charge that he and the SCLC were "outside agitators." First, he met the charge on its face and noted that the SCLC had an affiliation with Shuttlesworth's local civil rights organization and that they had been invited to Birmingham by this organization. But then King pointedly called into question the very conception of insiders and outsiders in the face of injustice. "I am in Birmingham because injustice exists here," he said. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

King noted the clergymen's recoil at the demonstrations in Birmingham, but then observed that they had little to say about the conditions that occasioned them. With more than a hint of sarcasm, he alluded solicitously to their intellectual well-being: "I am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes."

King then turned to the clergymen's pleas for negotiations

Skunk cabbage

I've seen it in the hollows of the Cascades in Oregon, and head-high on the trail from Juneau up to the Icefield, there to perplex the pink mouth of a black bear.

And here it is along Cedar Creek in Michigan—dark green, leafy as ever, moisting out of the dark ravines like misplaced dollar bills.

But what can you buy this time of year with skunk cabbage?
Just this: violet, trillium, marigold, spring beauty.

Paul Willis

rather than demonstrations, arguing forcefully that this dichotomy, like that between insiders and outsiders, was in this case a false one. Shuttlesworth, he noted, had pursued desegregation negotiations with Birmingham's businessmen in the fall of 1962 and won an agreement promising an end to Jim Crow in department store dressing rooms. But the merchants had reneged on these promises. Direct action was thus not an alternative to negotiations but an effort to force new, good faith negotiations.

Here King articulated a crucial point about nonviolent direct action. Sit-ins, marches and boycotts were not merely gestures of moral suasion but also exercises of coercive force, a matter of "creating tension," as King put it. "The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." Power and privilege are rarely freely granted to others by those who possess them; they must be taken by means of "pressure." "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

As for the "untimeliness" of the protests, King simply noted that African-American patience was not inexhaustible. "There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair." Too often counsels of patience from white people had been ill-disguised perpetual holding actions. "This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'"

But why break the law? The clergymen had indicted Wallace for proposing to do so, and now they were registering the same indictment against King. What was the difference between Wallace and King in this respect? How could King consistently demand that southerners obey the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* while he was violating the local injunction against demonstrations?

These questions occasioned King's defense of civil disobedience. There are, he said, just and unjust laws. He urged obedience to the first and violation of the second. But how then does one discern the difference?

Here King's strategic genius was on full display. Rather than making a singular argument for a distinction between just and unjust laws, he offered his readers a host of grounds, both sacred and secular, for the distinction. Thereby he afforded them the opportunity to choose the argument that most appealed to them, while implying that he had covered all the conceivable bases.

An unjust law, he began, was at odd with God's law, or natural law. Or, if one preferred a kind of normative psychological approach, "Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades the human personality is unjust." Segregation damaged the personality of both parties to oppression. "It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority." It substituted an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship. Or one might lean on the Christian existentialism of Paul Tillich: segregation was separation, and hence sin—an expression of humanity's "awful estrangement."

One might also look for signs of injustice in the procedures by which laws were enacted or enforced. "A law is unjust, for example, if a majority group compels a minority group to obey the statute but does not make it binding on itself." A law is unjust if it is imposed on a minority that itself had no part in enacting the law by electing the representatives who promulgated it. Lawmaking in a state such as Alabama, in which in some counties African Americans constituted a majority of the population but none of the registered voters, was inherently suspect. Finally, some laws were just on their face but unjust in their application. For a city to require a permit for holding a parade was not inherently unjust, but an injunction that forbid parading as a means of denying the right to peaceable assembly and free speech was unjust.

Civil disobedience, King insisted, was *civil* disobedience, that is, it did not evade the law as rabid segregationists advo-

King's letter demolished the arguments of white moderates.

cated, but faced the full consequences of breaking a law in order to make the case for changing that law. "One who breaks an unjust law must do so *openly*, *lovingly*, and with a willingness to accept the penalty," he averred. "I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law."

King devoted much of the remainder of the letter to his "disappointments" with white moderates, which were legion. He charged that they put order and peace above justice; that they blamed protesters for precipitating violence perpetrated by those who were violating their rights; and that they subscribed to a myth that time, of itself, heals wounds. He reserved a special expression of regret for the caution of those who "have remained silent and secure behind stained-glass windows." He took particular umbrage at the kind words the eight clergymen had for the Birmingham police who had thus far contained the protests in an orderly fashion. "I doubt," he suggested, "that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry dogs sinking their teeth into six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes."

Saying he was taken aback by the clergymen's characterization of him and his movement as "extreme," King noted that he had seen his nonviolent protest as an alternative to the truly extreme flirtation with violence by black nationalists, and the Nation of Islam in particular. But on second thought, under the circumstances he took satisfaction in embracing the "extremist" label. Maybe, he said, "the question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?" Extremism,

in short, was at times well justified. "Perhaps the south, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists."

King could not resist closing with a final barbed paragraph of mock politesse. "If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me."

he letter had little immediate impact on the battle in Birmingham. It would not earn a wide audience for weeks. Events there turned rather on the enactment of its principles and strategies in the city's streets in early May. This enactment was led not by King himself but by a battle-hardened activist from Nashville, James Bevel.

Bevel turned the focus of the movement's recruitment effort in Birmingham from adults to children. Beginning on May 2, black children, some as young as six, from the city's schools surmounted the efforts of school officials to keep them in class and marched illegally into the city's streets over a period of several days. There they confronted Connor's canine police and firemen armed with powerful water hoses. This time, Connor snapped and ordered an assault. Dogs fiercely attacked the demonstrators, and the fire hoses, capable of stripping the bark off trees, pinned the children to the sides of buildings, shredding their clothes. Birmingham jails filled to capacity, and cameras captured the brutality for Americans around the country.

These demonstrations forced Birmingham's business leaders to the bargaining table for negotiations that began to hammer out a settlement that would meet most of the demands of the movement. They also moved the heretofore restrained Ku Klux Klan to bitterly attack what Alabama Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton termed "the meddlesome, conniving, manipulating moves of these *professional businessmen*." On Friday night, May 10, the Klan bombed the home of King's brother, A. D. King, and almost simultaneously blew up the Gaston Hotel, which King and the SCLC had made their headquarters. Though no one was hurt, the explosions set off a rampage of rioting by enraged blacks. Wallace sent in state troopers, renowned thugs who dealt out violence with their billy clubs

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and rifle butts more than equal to the dogs and fire hoses of the city police.

The settlement with the downtown moderates survived this fresh round of violence, thanks in part to the mediation of Burke Marshall, the Justice Department official whom the Kennedy brothers sent to Birmingham to aid in the negotiations. Sickened by the images of terror from the demonstrations and alert to their adverse effect on the nation's image abroad, John Kennedy finally moved to lay the groundwork for federal intervention in the conflict.

In a dramatic speech on June 11, Kennedy set aside his own stubborn moderation—at least rhetorically—and echoed King's arguments in the letter. "The events in Birmingham and elsewhere," he said, "have so increased the cries for equality that no city or state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them. . . . Who among us would then be content with counsels of patience and delay? . . . Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality." Practically speaking, Kennedy announced his intention to introduce new federal civil rights legislation, setting in motion the train of events that would eventually result in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

June 1963 also brought new life to the letter, which now found a sympathetic national audience in the wake of the brutal, well-publicized attacks on the demonstrators in Birmingham. Not surprisingly, it was the Christian Century that served its initial transmission to an expansive readership. The magazine had followed King's work closely and sympathetically since the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956 and had published several of his articles in its pages. In October 1958, he was named one of four new editors-at-large, and at the time the letter was published, he was a contributing editor.

The CENTURY had itself counseled moderation in the late 1950s, although not without an acute awareness that "to plead for time for white Americans' education and conversion is at the same time to ask Negro Americans for more patience with the insufferable, more making-do with the present possibilities of action. It is to risk misinterpretation to knuckling under to white bitter-enders."

By 1963, the magazine had run out of patience. "Why not

now?" the editors asked in March on the eve of the Birmingham demonstrations. "The Negro is tired of 'by and by,' contemptuous of 'after a while." Moderation had come to mean "big talk, little action and continuous, cunning postponements of the day when the Negro will come into his full rights in American society. How long, O Lord, how long!"

The CENTURY reported and commented fully on racial politics in Birmingham and elsewhere, publishing more articles on race relations in 1963 than on any other subject. Like King, its editors and reporters directed much of their fire at "genteel, moderate Christians." Instead of advising King to "put the brakes on a little bit," they advised white ministers to save their exhortations for moderation for King's enemies. "Through centuries of indifference and deliberate inhumanity the white man piles up great deposits of racial and sociological dynamite. Then, when the outraged Negro begins to exercise his constitutional rights, the guilty white conscience pleads for moderation in fear that the explosives may be ignited."

In August, the magazine reported that it had received over 50 responses to the letter from readers, all of them favorable. "In all my years of reading your periodical," one declared, "I have never been more moved by a single issue. What a shaking experience! If the canon of Holy Scriptures were not closed, I would nominate Martin Luther King's statement either as a continuation of the Acts of the 'Apostles or as an addition to the Epistles in the best tradition of the Pauline prison letters." A minister from suburban Pennsylvania confessed that "I stand condemned, along with my people, on every count of this masterful indictment. . . . My conscience will not rest until my voice and energy are aroused from silence and lethargy on this poignant issue."

he hard-won victory in Birmingham was of less consequence for its immediate effects on segregation, which were modest, than for the fresh momentum, additional resources and valuable allies it won for a flagging civil rights movement. A long and fierce struggle nonetheless remained. On the night of Kennedy's speech, Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers was gunned down in his driveway. Three months later, in Birmingham, the Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church from which the May demonstrations had been launched, killing four little girls.

With passage of the Civil Rights Act, resistance to southern racism took a new turn, focusing heavily on campaigns for voter registration. The editors of the CENTURY, evidencing perhaps a bit of persistent moderation, warmly greeted this turn. "Demonstrations may still have their place in states where physical and financial terrorism provide no other recourse," they wrote. "But the historic and finally most reliable recourse of the citizens of a democracy who seek redress of grievances is in the ballot."

Already in 1963, as it lambasted white moderates and threw its weight behind King, the CENTURY observed



ominously that King was often himself unfairly tarred with the brush of moderation by black critics who regarded nonviolent direct action as a painfully slow, timidly accommodationist strategy for racial justice. The magazine attacked Malcolm X as a "charismatic demagogue," and James Baldwin, in particular, seemed to get under its skin ("Gray Flannel Muslim?").

Yet, in defending King from such critics, CENTURY editors sometimes defanged him. In a July 31, 1963, editorial titled "Tom Paines and Uncle Toms," they attempted to situate King between these two extremes, ignoring King's own embrace of "creative extremism" in the letter. Describing "Tom Paines" as those who "break cherished images, defy immoral legalities, slash the red tape of genteel parliaments, alarm and embarrass their friends and sometimes in ways which to other men appear absurd demand for Negroes elemental human and civil rights," the editors acknowledged that such figures were essential to the black freedom struggle. But, they said, the movement also needed "Washingtons and Jeffersons" (an unfortunate choice of slaveholding founders) "who with sound judgment and the long view put a nation together." Placing King in the latter category, the CENTURY reinforced the black nationalist portrait of him as a timid, unduly compromising trimmer, if not an Uncle Tom, and denied him the mantle of Paine that was his due.

King was a dreamer, to be sure, and racial reconciliation was his dream. But he was also a skillful politician and just warrior,

unafraid to acknowledge that nonviolent direct action was coercive force, as Reinhold Niebuhr no less than Mahatma Gandhi, had taught him. King's tough-minded, realistic politics were right out of the *Moral Man and Immoral Society* playbook. "Nonviolence," he said, "is a powerful as well as a just weapon."

Unhappily, as the chorus of King's critics among black nationalists grew louder in the years after Birmingham, estimates of King's audacity, courage and political savvy unfairly diminished—as did an appreciation of the rich possibilities of just political warfare armed with the weapons of nonviolent direct action (and prophetic religion). As one guardian of King's legacy, historian and editor Clayborne Carson, has said, "Black power advocates of the late 1960s were too willing to abandon the nonviolent tactics that had enabled southern blacks to transform their discontent into effective political action. By rejecting nonviolence as unmanly and ineffective against white racist power structures, they deprived their followers of a set of tactics that had enabled discontented black people to achieve historic civil rights gains."

In February 1968, shortly before his assassination, King returned home to Montgomery, Alabama, where his career in the black freedom struggle had begun. Addressing a mass meeting, he fell into reverie and memories of Birmingham and the battle with Bull Connor: "And then ol' Bull would say as we kept moving, 'Turn on the fire hoses,' and they did turn 'em on. But what they didn't know was that we had a fire that no water could put out." Amen.

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Do we really want to live forever?

Thirst for life

by Gilbert Meilaender

AS THE NUMBER of our years increases, as we age in that simple chronological sense, we also age in a more important and profound sense. Gradually but progressively our bodies begin to function less effectively, and that increasing loss of function makes us more vulnerable to disease and death. Nevertheless, we distinguish aging from disease. Unlike disease, aging is a normal stage of life that seems built in. Though it makes us more vulnerable to disease, it is not itself a pathology.

Is it any surprise, then, that we have mixed feelings about aging? We're a bit like the character in Wallace Stegner's novel *The Spectator Bird* whose "last Christmas letter contained a line that should be engraved above every geriatric door. He says that when asked if he feels like an old man he replies that he does not, he feels like a young man with something the matter with him." Our uncertainties can only become more pro-

Do we want just more life or a complete life?

nounced as we find ourselves in a world where life prolongation and age retardation have become serious scientific projects pursued (and funded) by serious men and women.

For the moment this often means simply taking some rather conventional steps—diet, exercise, stress reduction—though, to be sure, taking them with intensity. But many hope that such measures will keep us in good health so that we can profit still more from an era, perhaps on the horizon, in which biotechnological advances will ceaselessly repair the accumulated damage in our bodies that is the mark of aging. This repair may take many forms—chromosome replacement, regenerative medicine using cloned stem cells, drugs that mimic the effects of caloric restriction or that lengthen telomeres.

Whatever the precise route or routes may be, however, many are eager to move beyond the psalmist's depiction of our life as "threescore years and ten" or perhaps "by reason of strength fourscore." So, for example, on his widely read blog Instapundit, Glenn Reynolds often links to stories reporting on possible advances in antiaging technologies. And having linked to such a report, he then regularly adds his own very brief comment: "Faster, please."

Desirable as indefinite life prolongation may sound to us, at least in some of our moods it invites us to forget another kind of desire that those who are creatures should not quench. Josef Pieper observes that St. Thomas saw that "a being obviously directed toward something else 'cannot possibly have as his ultimate goal the preservation of his own existence!' In other words, the allaying of the thirst cannot consist simply in the mere continued existence of the thirster." Remembering this, we may wonder whether full speed ahead is the right attitude to take toward research aimed at indefinite extension of life.

How, then, shall we think about the related projects of age retardation and life prolongation? I imagine a conversation among three friends—Artie, Augie and Frank. None of them supposes he has all the answers. Each is intrigued by the views of the other two. But each surely thinks that his view best captures how we ought to think. It might go something like this.

Frank: I'm a little baffled by you two. Both of you say that you think life is a great good for human beings. You, Augie, even talk of it often as a blessing. But when I say we should try to prolong it as much as possible, neither one of you seems to agree. If life is so good, what's wrong with wanting more of it?

Artie: Of course, it's not wrong in every instance to want to prolong life. But have I ever really said to you that life itself, just more moments of it, is good? If I have, I should take it back. What's good is not simply more life but a complete life—a life that has a certain form and trajectory, that moves through stages that give it meaning. To die prematurely is to die before that trajectory is completed. But to want to hang on indefinitely after we've worked our way to the end of the story doesn't seem to me to get more of a good thing but instead to destroy what gives life its beauty.

Frank: Has it ever occurred to you that you might be too fond of the word *trajectory*?

Artie: Well, I'll try not to take refuge in it too often. But my point is simply that life is not just a series of identical moments, coming one after the other and capable of indefinite extension. The moments of our lives have different meanings—and a different feel—precisely because they have different places in the

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whole. Surely you understand that. You wouldn't put the first paragraph of one of your essays at the end; its meaning depends on its location in the "trajectory" of the entire argument. For you more life is all that counts; for me a complete life is the good we should desire.

Frank: I can't see that your notion of completion is more attractive than living on indefinitely at the peak of my powers, even if that means one moment is pretty much like those that come before and follow after it. They'd be good moments. More life sounds just fine to me.

Artie: Of course you assume it would be at the peak of your powers. Do you know the story of Tithonus?

Frank: Yes, I know it, and I've thought about it. I never said that prolonged senescence was a desirable outcome of extending life. Longer life has to come in tandem with retarding aging in all possible ways, physical and mental. But why be a skeptic about what researchers may be able to accomplish? It's a brave man who bets against scientific progress.

Artie: I don't bet against it. I'm just not sure I'm ready to agree with you about what would constitute progress. Augie, you've been awfully quiet. Where do you come down on this question?

Augie: Well, I'm afraid that I agree with you both—and disagree with you both. I surely do agree with Frank that this life, even with its (sometimes very great) dangers and problems, is a blessing. So wanting more of it doesn't seem silly at all. But I

also agree with you, Artie, that life seems to need what—avoiding the word *trajectory*—I'll just call a shape. And one of the things that gives it shape is that at some point it comes to completion.

Frank: So you agree with both of us. I'm not sure how that helps, but what about the disagreement? You said you also disagree with us.

Augie: Whether our ideal is simply more life or a complete life, in either case something would still—it seems to me be missing. I think of us as being on the way toward something we can't quite seem to get hold of. There's a thirst in us that is not just a desire for more life and not just a desire for a complete life. I always think of our lives in relation to God. So in one way it makes no difference whether our lives are long or short; every moment in them is equidistant from God. In another way, of course, it does make a difference, since this life has a God-given shape that brings it to a kind of earthly completion. That much Artie has right. But ours is a composite nature—we are organisms, but organisms who are drawn out of ourselves toward God-and Artie sometimes sees only one part of that picture. You, Frank, also see a part of the truth. It must be true

that we should often use our freedom to make life better, but if that freedom to make and remake ourselves without limit were the only truth about us, we'd be thinking of ourselves almost as gods, rather than seeing ourselves as creatures in relation to God.

Artie: I'm not sure that's quite fair. I grant that we have what you call a composite nature, that we're not just bodies. I just don't know where all this talk about God comes from. Why don't we try a slightly different angle? Part of a complete life is that we produce those who will come after us and, having produced them, we must eventually give way to them. So even if it seems paradoxical, part of flourishing as the creatures we are is going to seed and, eventually, dying.

Augie: You're right, I think, that producing and nurturing the next generation, accepting that they will take our place, makes us better people. It teaches us gratitude for the gift of our own lives.

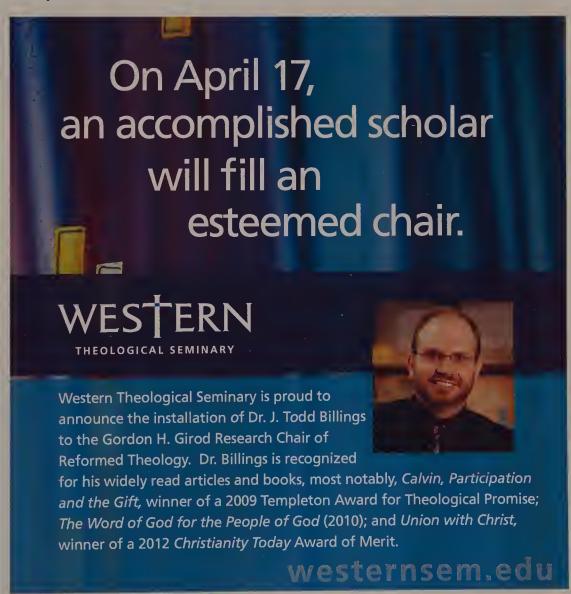
Frank: Gratitude to whom?

Augie: I suppose that's a question that Artie and I will have to take up another time.

Frank: I can't say that I feel any strong urge to produce my replacement. I'm quite content to hang onto my life for as long as I can.

Augie: I didn't say you could be replaced; I said others would take your place. There's a difference.

Artie: You know, Frank, I'm not sure I believe that you



would be content just to hang onto your own life indefinitely. It's natural to want to have children, to care for them and to hand on to them our culture and beliefs. Not wanting to be replaced strikes me as narcissistic, not virtuous. In fact, in your quite different ways both you and Augie seem to forget that living on and on almost forever might become rather boring. We're bodies, after all. Human beings have limited capacities, and we'd eventually run out of new sources for enjoyment. The goodness of anything, even the best of things, eventually loses its power to delight.

Augie: Anything? What about the face of someone you love? Doesn't it at least suggest to you that there must be a face you would be content to love forever?

Frank: Natural, as someone once said, is a word to conjure with. What's natural, it seems to me, is to exercise our rational freedom (call it "God-given freedom" if you like, Augie) in order to make our lives better and satisfy our desires more fully. Artie, you think we'll get bored if we live too long, because the capacities of human beings are limited. But let your imagination soar a bit. Already we're learning to take baby steps to enhance and reshape our lives. We're not bodies, we're free spirits who for now have to use our organic bodies as the best prosthesis available. Some day we'll cast them off and be free of the limits you seem to like so much. And we'll get a real immortality, not the sort that Augie tries so hard to sell.

Artie: Those are fine words, Frank, though perhaps tinged with just a hint of desperation. But I don't think you can actually live in accord with your theory. I don't think you can love others, share a life with them and be fully involved in their lives, while all the time thinking of yourself as detached from

Flamboyance

The wild rose summer's flower along the fading path grows sweet though it only lives & dies to itself & spring's unseen trilliums in forest shade are lost only to us if the haste of our lives won't let us pass Such flamboyance draws things on delicate wings & never goes to waste though like grass soon withering

The scientist in lab coat or hip-waders knows to seek meaning in what he observes The poet suspects the right metaphors await her astir in stream glisten afloat in pond stillness asleep in forest glade for nature makes nothing in vain

Colour & camouflage ash & flame seem ready to re-ignite as we listen

D. S. Martin

the body that connects you to them. And there's something wrong with a theory that can't be lived.

Augie: And I marvel, Frank, that you find my talk of a resurrected body to be an unbelievable flight of fancy! What you can't tolerate, I'm afraid, is some contingency and mystery in life. But it's just that contingency that makes life sweet and, at the same time, suggests the promise of something more.

learly, this is a conversation that could continue indefinitely; it need not come to an end here. But we can pause and take stock for a moment. Three general angles of vision compete for our allegiance. Not all are equally persuasive or wise, in my view, but each makes central an aspect of our nature that is genuinely important, hence each has a place in the conversation.

It's a blessing that our earthly lives are limited.

We may focus on the fact that human beings are organisms, embedded in the finite, natural world and following the trajectory of all organic life through relatively fixed stages of life—from modest beginnings to full blossoming of capacities (including the capacity to generate a successor generation) and eventually "going to seed." From this first perspective, our commitment to age retardation brings not only benefits but also harms and should, in any case, be a modest commitment.

We may, by contrast, focus on that which distinguishes human beings from other organisms, namely, the freedom and reason that allow us indefinitely to transcend the limits of our finite condition, to make and remake ourselves in ever new ways that may promise (or threaten) to transcend our organic beginnings. From this second perspective, the projects of age retardation and life prolongation testify to what is most human about us—a freedom that knows few limits.

A third alternative is to discern in humans a nature marked not only by organic limits and rational freedom but by something we may describe as "ecstatic." That is, we are characterized by a thirst that can be quenched neither by making our peace with the beauty and pathos of the limits of organic life nor by continual progress in the improvement and extension of our lives. We are, in this view, drawn out of ourselves toward God, and satisfaction of that longing could not possibly come from more of this life, however long extended. From this third perspective, we can and should think it a blessing that our lives are of limited duration—not because this life is not good, but because it cannot finally bring the completion needed for us truly to flourish.

My own view, like Augie's, is that the third perspective best captures the truth of who we are and who we are yet to become. There is sometimes good reason, as we age, to feel that something is the matter with us. There is also good reason to feel that we are young—with the youthfulness of eternity.



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Naboth's vineyard and God's justice

Forgiving Ahab

by Samuel Wells

THE STRANGEST THING about freedom in America is not how invisible it is to a foreigner or how cherished it is by those who live there but how frequently it's portrayed as being under threat. Unlike almost every other country in the world, America went through the 20th century without being invaded or living under totalitarian government, and it left the century with the same constitution with which it entered it. Yet nowhere else is public discourse so saturated with the rhetoric of freedom being in daily peril. When one political party looks to be elected, the right of abortion on demand is seen as on the point of being snatched away. When another party looks to be elected, the right to bear arms is said to be in dire jeopardy. When America is attacked by an unknown force, the president assumes that the attack comes from parties who "hate our freedoms."

One feature of American life that fascinates me is the degree to which the law in general—and the Constitution in particular, and what might be called the amphitheater of the Supreme Court—has become the focal point of our culture. We've come to believe that the best place to discover right and wrong, to identify good and bad, and to resolve ambiguity is the law court. I would guess that of all the dramas broadcast on network television over a regular month, more than half include some kind of pivotal courtroom scene. The wonderful dimension of this is the remarkable statement of hope that our diverse culture really can function harmoniously and that rules can emerge to govern this flourishing effectively. The risk is that the attention given to getting the rules right can distract from the fact that a healthy society is always primarily about relationships and only secondarily about rules.

The question is whether it's ever possible for a society to reach a point that could be called justice. For all the drama and excitement of electing a new president to occupy the White House every four years, it sometimes seems that the most significant job a president gets to do is to appoint new members of the Supreme Court. And no one for a moment thinks the president will be impartial. Everyone assumes that he will want to stack the court with like-minded judges. It makes you wonder whether anyone really believes in justice, or if we've all settled for the manipulation of the legal system to get the results we want. But that shouldn't make us cynical. After all, a flawed legal system is a lot better than no legal system at all. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important."

And that brings us to the story of Naboth's vineyard, from 1 Kings. This is a salutary story of what happens when there's no justice and the powerful get to crush those who stand in their way. Ahab is king of the northern territory of the land of Israel. Beside his palace lies a vineyard, and Ahab wants to purchase it. But Naboth adheres to the ancient property laws of Israel, by which land cannot be transferred from one household to another. So he refuses. Ahab sulks on his bed. But his wife Jezebel says in effect, "What kind of king are you?" She sends instructions to the nobles in Jezreel, instructing them to have Naboth lynched. The nobles obey Jezebel's instructions to the letter, and in no time the vineyard belongs to Ahab.

A society that has forgotten how to forgive can never be truly just.

On the face of it, the story of Naboth's vineyard is a precise illustration of Martin Luther King's point. If there's no law, or at least no law enforcement, there's nothing to keep someone from lynching a person, and that does seem pretty important. In a society in which the king and queen have unbridled power, justice is an early casualty. Of course, the kingdom of Israel was not, in fact, a lawless society. There was a law, and that law was the covenant made between God and Moses at Mount Sinai, a covenant designed to help Israel keep the freedom God had given it by bringing its people out of the land of Egypt. And because Israel was always in danger of ignoring or forgetting the covenant, God sent prophets to remind the people of their story and restore their faithfulness. One of those prophets was Elijah. Elijah pays a visit to Ahab as he's sitting in the vineyard that so recently belonged to Naboth. And Elijah speaks God's justice to Ahab as only an Old Testament prophet can: "In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood" (1 Kings 21:19).

So the bad guy doesn't get away with it. But this is a rather depressing portrayal of justice. It's depressing for several rea-

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sons. Number one, justice appears to have no preventative power. It can't stop people from doing terrible things to one another — it can only punish them for doing so. Number two, it seems that any system of law enforcement is only as effective as the force that lies behind it. And that makes justice little more than a grand word for the exercise of power. Number three, justice doesn't do the one thing that Naboth's family really wants and needs it to do—namely, restore the life of Naboth himself. Justice can identify the transgression, justice can pass sentence, justice can ensure punishment, justice can stop the wrongdoing; yet justice can't heal, can't

restore, can't reconcile, can't genuinely

make anything better.

But there's a lot more going on in this story than a gruesome tale of ruthless oppression and its just deserts. Let's look for a moment at what this story is really about. It's really an Israelite horror show.

In the first place, look at the way Ahab rehearses all the sins of the Old Testament. Like David with Bathsheba, Ahab takes what is not his and arranges the death of the one who stands in his path. Like Cain with Abel, Ahab attacks his brother out of jeal-ousy and impatience. Like Adam with Eve, Ahab takes the fruit of the vineyard when it is evidently God's will for him not to do so. The story of Naboth's vineyard is all of Israel's sins in one go.

Also, look at how this story represents Israel choosing slavery over freedom. The vineyard is a frequent metaphor for Israel. But Ahab wants Naboth's vineyard as a "vegetable garden"—a term used only one other time in the Old Testament, where it refers to Egypt (Deut. 11:10). So Ahab's desire to turn Naboth's vineyard into a vegetable garden is a symbol of Ahab's intent to take Israel back to the conditions of slavery in Egypt. When Ahab kills Naboth and takes possession of the vineyard, what we're supposed to recognize is an ironic echo of exactly what Israel did under Joshua in driving out the Canaanites and taking possession of the Promised Land.

On top of that, notice how in this story injustice is portrayed in the disordering of relationships. First, the relationship with the land. Naboth understands his own land to be like the Promised Land, a gift in trust from God that can't be sold or traded away. Ahab, by contrast, sees land as a transferable commodity. Second, the relationship with the king. Israel saw the monarchy as a gift of trust to help the people embody the will of God. Ahab saw the throne as a mechanism for him

to acquire anything he wanted by force. Third, the relationship with God. Elijah has already been shown to follow God's orders to the letter. When in this story the nobles of Jezreel follow the behest of the gentile Queen Jezebel to the letter, we're being shown that she has become their God. Israel has completely lost the plot.

So this is what the story of Naboth's vineyard is comprehensively showing us. Justice unravels when we lose sight of who we are in relation to God, and once justice has had a great fall, it's a tall order to put it back together again. I wonder if you yourself have been close enough to an experience of justice or



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injustice to feel the profound pain of this story. Maybe you've been the victim of cruelty or crime, and no legal attempt to make amends can ever truly address the repercussions and the damage. Maybe you yourself have done something seriously wrong and don't know how you can ever restore the relationships and the trust. Maybe you have been close to someone who's been some part of this spiral of justice and injustice, and you've seen how lives can be wrecked as if visited by a tornado and how seldom the criminal justice system really makes things better.

There really is only one thing that can make things better. There really is only one thing that can make any difference in a situation where you can't bring Naboth back. There really is only one thing that can prevent an act of merciless force and the crushing of an innocent life from turning into a spiral of retribution, a vendetta of vindictiveness and a cascade of vigilante revenge. And that single thing is forgiveness.

Today there are plenty of dispossessed Naboths and plenty of unjust Ahabs on which to focus our reflections. When we see Naboth die we tend to push forgiveness back until later. We're outraged by the lynching. We're horrified by the way Ahab treats land and law and liberty. We're worried about seeming naive or soft or being powerless to stop Ahab and Jezebel from doing it all over again to someone else. In short, we push forgiveness aside because we think it will get in the way of justice. So we charge in with our own version of justice. We get so consumed with that version of justice that we never get around to the forgiveness part. And in the process we forget the gospel just as much as Ahab forgot the covenant.

Little Naboth story alongside the story of Jesus being anointed by a sinful woman (Luke 7:36–50). Jesus is in the house of Simon the Pharisee. A woman enters whom everyone knows to be a sinner. She bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Simon is furious. Jesus turns the tables on Simon. He points out the multiple ways in which Simon has been rude to him. Jesus says there's only one thing to be done with wrongdoing, whether it's a sin of commission, like the woman's, or a sin of omission, like Simon's. And that's to forgive.

Forgiveness shouldn't be the last thing Christians have to say in the face of injustice. It should be the first thing. Forgiveness says, "You can hurt me, but you can't take away my allegiance to Christ. You can be cruel to me, but you can't make me become like you. You can crush me, but you can't put yourself outside the mercy of God."

Why do we forgive? Because we don't want to turn into creatures of bitterness locked up in the past, and we don't want to be given over to a hatred that lets those who've hurt us continue to dominate our lives. Why do we forgive? Because, unlike Simon, we know we're sinners too, and we can't withhold from others the forgiveness we so desperately need for ourselves. That's why in the Lord's Prayer we say, "Forgive us ... as we forgive those ... "Why do we forgive? Because Jesus in his cross and resurrection has released the most powerful energy in the universe, and we want to be part of it and be filled with it. Why do we forgive? Because we know that all the forms of justice, all the systems for setting things straight, have failed. Why do we forgive? Because Jesus is dying for us to forgive. Jesus is dying for us to stop our shame and secrecy and beg for forgiveness. Jesus is dying for us to end our enmity and hard-heartedness and offer the hand of mercy. Jesus is dying for us to forgive. Why do we forgive? Because forgiveness is the justice of God.

Forgiveness is the justice of God. That's why a society that has forgotten how to forgive can never be truly just. Because the best that justice can do is to set the stage for forgiveness. Justice can't make things right. Even forgiveness can't make things right on its own—it takes repentance, it takes reconciliation, it takes making amends, it takes healing. But all these start with forgiveness. Forgiveness isn't the end of the process; it's the beginning. Forgiveness is the Christian word for justice.

The lesson of Naboth's vineyard is that in the end there's only one kind of injustice. All Ahab's sins come down to one. The fundamental injustice is that Ahab fails to honor God. He forgets who God is and what God is really like. Failing to honor God is, in the end, the real injustice from which all other kinds come. And here's the Christian version of that injustice. We forget that God's character is fundamentally about forgiveness. Because when Christ entered the story of the vineyard, he didn't become a better version of Ahab. He became Naboth.

He was condemned on trumped-up charges. He was lynched. But his justice was to pray, "Father, forgive." And his resurrection showed that God's forgiveness really does make things better in a way that our justice cannot.

If only we were a people known by everyone for forgiveness. But we're not. We're known for being obsessed with the law. If only what we were renowned for was forgiveness. That's what Jesus is dying for. Because forgiveness is the justice of God.

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by Stephanie Paulsell

Seeing through Piero

IF YOU WANT to immerse yourself in the art of the early Renaissance Italian painter Piero della Francesca, you need to make a pilgrimage to several small Italian hill towns as well as to museums in London and Paris, Boston and New York City and Williamstown, Massachusetts. Many art critics attest that this is a pilgrimage well worth making. Piero's paintings have the power to change lives, as art critic Peter Schjeldahl recently testified in the *New Yorker* (February 25). The serene dignity of his figures and forms "makes a viewer's spirit sit up straight."

So if you have the chance to see paintings by Piero della Francesca at the Frick Collection in New York this spring, don't miss it. The exhibit gathers up all but one of Piero's works held in American museums (plus a seventh from Portugal). Six of the panels come from the altarpiece Piero created for the Church of St. Augustine in Borgo San Sepolcro, his hometown. The seventh is a portrait of the virgin and child flanked by four angels, whose profound stillness and intelligence compel the attention of the viewer with an almost irresistible power.

The reviews of the exhibit have been enthusiastic, even rapturous, but they struggle to account for the religious quality of Piero's art. The reviewers seem to want to hold Piero's genius close while holding his religion at arm's length. But is it possible to separate the painterly challenges that Piero set for himself from the religious ideas that he sought to explore? Is it possible to extract his artistic genius from his religious thought?

Walter Kaiser's review in the New York Review of Books tries to do that (March 21). Kaiser focuses on the distinctive aspects of Piero's craft that set him apart from other painters—the play of light in his work, his geometric approach to form. Kaiser regards Piero's achievement as "a perfect union of art and science" born of a quality of mind marked by a mathematical and artistic perspective on the world around him. Kaiser makes no mention, however, of what Piero's perspective as a Christian engaged in an artistic exploration of the themes of his faith might have contributed to this quality of mind and the achievement to which it gave rise.

Schjeldahl gives a more personal account of the power of Piero's work. Recalling his encounter with Piero's *Madonna del Parto* as young man, he considers that, in another time, the experience might have led him to a monastic vocation. Piero did lead Schjeldahl to a life of devotion—as an art critic.

Schjeldahl's review is full of theological insight into Piero's paintings. He notes that Piero's gift for emphasizing the solidi-

ty and weight of his human figures illuminates the incarnational focus of his art. He points out that St. Augustine's cloak, made of panels depicting the life of Christ, conceals the mysterious postcrucifixion episodes of that story in folds of cloth. He describes the small paintings depicting individual saints as "building blocks of piety," suggesting their role in religious practice.

But ultimately Schjeldahl ends up in the same place as Kaiser, handling the religious thought that suffuses Piero's work uneasily and keeping its religious quality at a safe distance. Piero's religiosity leans toward the secular, Schjeldahl concludes, and his artistic achievement points to a future in which the Christian elements of works of art become "merely conventional." This is a persistent theme about Piero. In 1925, Aldous Huxley insisted that what we find in Piero's greatest works is "not Christianity, but a worship of what is admirable in man." Kaiser and Schjeldahl concur, finding the human dignity and nobility celebrated in Piero's art to be a classical ideal clothed in dispensable Christian garb.

What accounts for this diminishment of the Christian perspective of Piero's grave and luminous paintings? Is it a worry that the Christian images will obscure the artistic innovations that paved the way, as Kaiser argues, for modern artists like Cézanne and Seurat? Does the profound admiration of the critics create such a deep identification with the artist that they downplay perspectives that they do not share? Certainly the diminishment of the religious quality of Piero's art seems to depend upon an impoverished view of Christianity as wholly otherworldly and opposed to what is human. To this understanding of Christianity, Piero offers a powerful corrective.

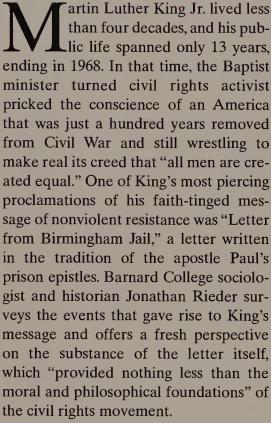
It is by no means necessary to be a Christian to appreciate or to love or to be changed by Piero's work. Anyone of any faith or none who stands before one of his paintings can experience what Schjeldahl describes as "a sense of being steadied and elevated": such is Piero's great gift to the human race. But that ennobling quality—the revelation that we are more than we even know ourselves to be—is not the opposite of Christianity but an embodiment of its bedrock convictions. In the art of Piero della Francesca, Christianity—far from being "merely conventional"—becomes a religious account of the world, one that reveals and illuminates the most profound possibilities our humanity holds.

Stephanie Paulsell teaches practice of ministry studies at Harvard Divinity School.

Review

Prophetic epistle

by Edward Gilbreath



The year 1963 was a crucial one for King. Many recall the August 1963 March on Washington, which begat King's legendary "I Have a Dream" speech, as the defining moment of the civil rights movement. But the setting for the year's most crucial action was not Washington, D.C., but Birmingham, Alabama.

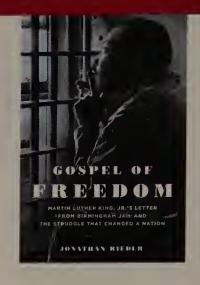
Birmingham was a place described by King as "the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States." It was a city where not only were libraries segregated, but books containing images of black rabbits and white rabbits on the same page were banned from the shelves. It was a city where, according to a famous report by *New York Times* correspondent Harrison Salisbury, "every medium of mutual interest, every reasoned approach, every inch of middle ground has been fragmented by the emotional

dynamite of racism." It was a city where bullets, bombs and burning crosses served as constant deterrents to African Americans who aspired to anything greater than their assigned station. There, during the spring of 1963, King and his associates in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference staged a nonviolent campaign that transformed America.

The campaign, which was aimed at desegregating the city's businesses and public facilities, started with a whimper but would find its legs weeks later when elementary and high-school students were recruited to participate in the demonstrations. It is the iconic images of those children and teens marching against the brutal assaults of Birmingham public safety commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor's fire hoses and police dogs that stunned the nation and led to the eventual dismantling of the Deep South's elaborate system of apartheid.

Rieder weaves this history in and out of his narrative, reminding us at every turn just how fragile and human the desegration effort was from the outset. On April 12, 1963-Good Friday-King was arrested for demonstrating on the streets of Birmingham. He spent eight days in solitary confinement. Meanwhile, the movement threatened to implode from the weight of internal and external forces—an initially unfocused strategy, infighting among the leadership, a Kennedy administration beholden to the votes of segregationist Democrats, and conservative black businessmen uneasy about the public protests.

King was slipped a copy of the local newspaper in which he spotted a "Call to" Unity" from a group of prominent,



Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther
King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham
Jail and the Struggle That
Changed a Nation
By Jonathan Rieder

Bloomsbury Press, 240 pp., \$25.00

socially moderate Birmingham ministers. The group—composed of six Protestant ministers, a Catholic bishop and a Jewish rabbi—was supportive of civil rights for Negroes but critical of King's "extreme" protest methods, which the clergymen felt would lead to civil unrest and unnecessary violence. They referred to King as an "outsider" and criticized the movement for "unwise and untimely" demonstrations.

This attack both hurt and infuriated King. Scrawling feverishly in the margins of the newspaper and on any other paper scraps he could obtain, King fired off an almost stream-of-consciousness rebuttal of the clergymen's statement. His scribblings were gradually smuggled out of the jail by an aide and later edited into a cohesive whole under the supervision of King's SCLC colleague Wyatt Tee Walker.

Gospel of Freedom takes its title and momentum from King's words in the letter's introduction defending his presence in Birmingham: "Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left

Edward Gilbreath is the author of Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity and Remembering Birmingham: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter to America—50 Years Later. his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom far beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."

Rieder traces the letter's rhetorical flow from King's initial attempt to "win over his critics through appeals to their reason, sympathy, and conscience" to its sudden midpoint shift to a more blunt and indignant tone. "King drops the mask," says Rieder. "Instead of explaining himself, he chides and criticizes. He shows himself to be not just a black man but an angry black man. The diplomat gives way to the prophet."

In a post-civil rights era that over time has steadily tamed and sanitized King's radical opposition to social injustice, Rieder boldly hoists before us a more nearly complete Martin Luther King Jr. whose profound appeals to nonviolence were balanced by equally aggressive calls to resist the spiritual corruption and institutionalized racism of American society and, when necessary, its resultant laws. The author's previous book on King, The Word of the Lord Is Upon Me, provided a similarly insightful contribution to MLK scholarship, offering an unvarnished meditation on King's several voices—his black Baptist voice, his community organizer voice and his "white" crossover voice. That book revealed King the bawdy jokester, King the angry prophet—and above all King the devout black churchman. Gospel of Freedom revives and deepens that approach, examining "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as both King's formal public response to white moderate critics as well as an intimate, "transcribed form of oral culture" for his black allies.

Rieder examines the letter's importance on political, spiritual and literary grounds, but he also recognizes the document's origins as a device for propaganda. Indeed, the idea of creating a prison epistle as a kind of press release for the movement had been floated during one of King's earlier jail stints but was nixed. While this speaks to the fact that there always had been a PR motive in mind, Rieder's analysis leaves no question that he views the actual writing

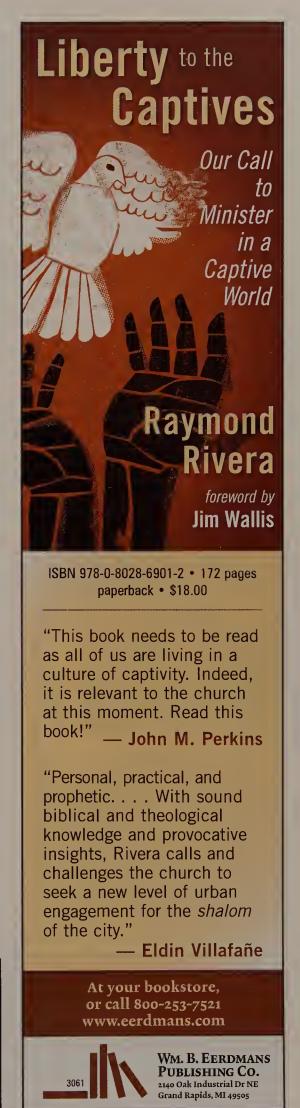
of the Birmingham letter as King's impassioned, real-time reaction to the eight clergymen's public censure of his message.

Though "Letter from Birmingham Jail" did not play a role in resolving the immediate conflict in Birmingham, it would "spread beyond the events that spawned it" and earn comparisons to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Émile Zola's "J'Accuse." Weeks after the Birmingham campaign, condensed versions of King's missive found their way to the public in publications such as the New York Post and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christianity and Crisis journal. But it was not until the June 12, 1963, issue of the CHRISTIAN CENTURY that the complete letter was printed—along with an invitation for readers to send checks to support the work of the SCLC. Perhaps sensing the historic nature of their gesture, the editors wrote: "Believing that the document expresses, better than any other we have seen, the quality of mind and spirit which informs the most important movement for integration in the south, we ... publish it as a contribution to justice in race relations and in the faith that it will help heal a most grievous wound which this nation is inflicting upon herself."

In an allegedly postracial America, we have yet to fully heal those selfinflicted wounds. The election of a black president and a keener awareness of the systemic injustices facing people of color have not necessarily addressed the spiritual component of our dysfunction. But, as Rieder makes clear, the King who wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was under no illusion that America was "a providential nation whose destiny was freedom." He knew that it would require a dogged, ongoing commitment to the gospel of freedom in order for "all God's children" to be at peace with one another.

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The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology

By Douglas E. Christie Oxford University Press, 488 pp., \$29.95

hilosophy begins in wonder, claimed Plato long ago. In The Blue Sapphire of the Mind, Douglas E. Christie identifies this posture as a good place to start for those who seek to dwell on Earth faithfully and responsibly. Humility, awe and wonder: these attributes mark a path that promises to lead us beyond the ancient call to "fill the earth and subdue it" and into a deeper reverence for its beauty, according to Christie. It is a way that invites us to relate to Earth with care and curiosity, that beckons us to live by means of "an attitude of radical openness to the life of the other, to the world as a whole."

The ambiguity of the word wonder reminds us that such a disposition can

and probably should have a quizzical and even critical edge. How, for example, are we to face unexpected tragedies, the unavoidable ravages of disease, the unpredictable presence of death in our lives? What account can we possibly give to the spoiling of the land for reckless gain, with the threat to species inhabiting such imperiled ecosystems? How are we to manage the persistent and apparently ineradicable conflict between development and conservation? For those who recognize the unavoidability of such questions, Christie's book will come as a welcome guide, a gathering of spiritual "markings"—to recall the title of Dag Hammarskjöld's classic volume-that will lead us into a "contemplative ecology."

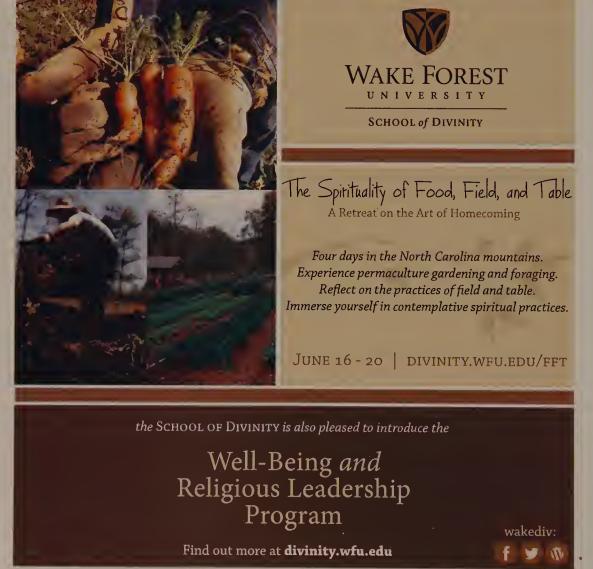
This volume belongs to a growing literature devoted to cultivating an "ecological spirituality." Within this tradition, Christie's intent is not simply to point toward the outward forms of change required of us. Nor is his aim to carve out an environmental ethic, as important

as this is in its own right. Rather, Christie focuses on discerning the inner side, the spiritual depths, of our presence as creatures inhabiting the earth. He hopes that the work of "reorienting contemplative practice . . . toward the local and the particular can help us retrieve a sense of the preciousness of the living world, its utter necessity." And he calls us to indwell our world as a spiritual practice, one that joins us to a chorus of others—artists and poets, naturalists and scientists, theologians and ethicistswhose wisdom can steer us forward in the midst-of environmental perils and ecological uncertainties.

Christie plumbs a wide variety of religious, spiritual and artistic sources and traditions as he leads us adroitly on this journey. He recognizes that as we deepen our sense of the precious vulnerabilities of our world and of our own lives, spiritual aspirations are akin to aesthetic perceptions and moral commitments. He invites us to wonder with him in cultivating a contemplative posture, one that has the interior power to strengthen our ethical commitments and shape our actions on behalf of creation—which, as the apostle Paul put it, is "groaning in travail."

Christie, already distinguished for his studies of ancient Christian monasticism, makes his case through a thickly layered and often elegantly shaped narrative. He probes ancient and modern Christian theological traditions and contemplative practices, bringing them into dialogue with insights from his own experiences as well as those of a wide and eclectic gathering of theologians and poets, scientists and mystics, activists and philosophers. The book is a veritable feast of wisdom. Christie draws out the often implicit implications of familiar theological teachings in provocative ways, allowing ancient and modern voices to engage each other in conversation.

Throughout the volume, Christie invites readers to become attentive to our world. Drawing on voices as com-



Reviewed by Mark S. Burrows, whose most recent book is a new translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's Prayers of a Young Poet (Paraclete). He is on the faculty of the University of Applied Sciences in Bochum, Germany.

pelling and diverse as Simone Weil and Henry David Thoreau, Athanasius and Annie Dillard, Vincent van Gogh and Thomas Merton, he not only brings readers into conversation with the natural world, with theological traditions both ancient and modern, and with activists and their concerns, he also creates common ground where readers can engage with one another across the spectrum of political and religious differences. With consummate intelligence and probing imagination Christie lures us into seeing the beauty that lies at the heart of our broken world.

In the book's closing chapter, Christie suggests how we might understand our lives as a way of "practicing paradise" in this life, not merely beyond it. In so doing he initiates us into what St. Benedict called *conversatio*—a distinctive "way of living" together. Christie guides us into the spiritual depths underlying the ethical and existential urgency so evident in current responses to the environmental crisis.

The Blue Sapphire of the Mind is a beautiful and important book, evocative and alluring, creative and often subtle as it leads us to encounter theological themes in fresh ways. As Christie invites us to enter a complex labyrinth of paths traced by experience and science, theology and the arts, he consistently avoids falling back on stale declarations that, even if true, too easily blunt our capacity to see and feel—the necessary preludes to acting. His work carries echoes of Thoreau's wise reminder that "the question is not what you look at but what you see."

These "notes for a contemplative theology" offer us a glimpse of what it might mean to live as if we could "see everything / and ourselves in everything / healed and whole forever," as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke put it. Such a vision, Christie suggests, is not simply naive fantasy or a case of wishful thinking. It is an enticement to dwell on Earth in a way that enables us to see it in its wholeness. If wonder is the beginning of wisdom, the contemplative ecology that wonder explores points us to love of this world, with all its beauty and brokenness, as the proper shape of the spiritual life.

Astonished: A Story of Evil, Blessings, Grace, and Solace

By Beverly Donofrio Viking, 240 pp., \$25.95

Beverly Donofrio had just been "looking for a monastery to join, for Christ's sake." She had closed her laptop, having bookmarked religious communities she might write to, then had fallen into a deep sleep. During the night she was raped at knife point in her home in Mexico.

Why me?

Even though I do know the important question is not why this happened to me but what I'm going to do now; and even though I was fifty-five and the attacker was a serial rapist in a small town, raping gringo women between fifty and sixty; and even though I, along with the entire town, felt like evil had come for a visit and it was not personal . . . I was absolutely shocked he chose me.

Why now? Beverly Donofrio's life had come to a fullness of love and success. Her first memoir, Riding in Cars with Boys, had been translated into 16 languages and made into a movie starring Drew Barrymore and directed by Penny Marshall. Her second memoir, Looking for Mary, had begun as a documentary on NPR and was chosen as a Discover book by Barnes & Noble. She had recently become a grandmother, which drew her into a depth of love she'd never imagined possible.

She didn't have an easy start, and she wasn't always religious. After becoming pregnant as a teenager, marrying a junkie, divorcing at 19, getting herself into college and graduating at 27, living in the underbelly of New York City and raising her son as a single mother, Donofrio found religious faith. It all started with yard sales. For no good reason, she began collecting religious kitsch relating to Mary, and then she fell in love with God.

Reviewed by Suzanne Guthrie, who posts a weekly self-guided retreat on each upcoming Sunday lectionary Gospel reading at At the Edge of the Enclosure.

Astonished is a memoir of prayer and discernment. After the rape, Donofrio followed through with her plan of actively seeking a monastic vocation. She visited five communities in six months. She went back to Mexico and endured the ordeal of the rape trial, facing her rapist in court. Then she spent the next two years as a vowed lay religious woman at a hermitage with a guest ministry in Colorado. She learned to begin integrating her personal horror into prayer, meditation, silence and service. She eventually came to realize that her faith is unshakable.

How many books about prayer and trauma are funny? Donofrio is quirky, street-smart, ironic and witty, and she also reveals embarrassing and petty failures of character. "If transformation was a job," she says, "I'd be fired." I laughed throughout the book despite the tragic occasion of its premise. In one scene, she's trapped in a cabin during a blizzard reading a book of doctrine, and it infuriates her: she is hungering to get back to reading a biography of dancer Rudolf

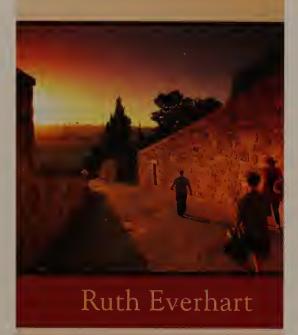
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Nureyev. She cries, has panic attacks, endures nightmares, makes friends and watches both the cruelty and beauty of nature around her. Her love of God deepens.

Donofrio is not a theologian. She doesn't use the word theodicy. Her spiritual needs are practical, and she offers a survivor's point of view: Why me? Why now? How can I learn from this? Can this evil in my life somehow make me a better person? Eventually she realizes, "If I keep thinking about it, focusing on evil, it'll take up house, and be impossible to get rid of." She writes that being a Christian means "transforming pain in order not to transmit it."

When the rapist was in her bed, Donofrio began to pray the Hail Mary in Spanish. "What are you doing?" he demanded. "I'm praying," she said. "For you." Then, instead of staying and torturing her as he had his other victims, he left. After the trial she wrote, "I pray for the rapist a few times but it doesn't feel sincere. I plan to work on it."

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News from Heaven: The Bakerton Stories

By Jennifer Haigh Harper, 256 pp., \$25.99

In her 2005 novel Baker Towers, Jennifer Haigh introduced readers to Bakerton, Pennsylvania, a town named after the coal mines that sustain it, and to the Novak family's five children, who alternately long to leave and can't help returning to their hometown in the years following World War II.

In News from Heaven, Haigh explores Bakerton again, this time through a book of stories that moves backward and forward in time, showing Bakerton throughout the 20th century and up to the present day. Her cast of characters expands from the Novak siblings to their neighbors, friends, enemies and offspring, all experiencing life in Bakerton at different points in its wartime heyday or its slow, inevitable decline.

Each story centers on whether a character left Bakerton, whether the character should have left and how the decision affected that person. As one character says late in the book, "Bakerton was not generally a town people came back to. You were born in Bakerton and either escaped, as Joyce's brothers had, or failed to."

It is interesting, then, that the book's opening story is the first and only tale in which someone leaves Bakerton against her will. Sixteen-year-old Annie Lubicki is hired as a live-in maid for a family in Manhattan. They are looking for a quiet, dependable Polish girl like their friends employ, and Annie's parents think the money will come in handy at the Bakerton farm. Everything about Annie's tenure in the city is confounding to her, especially the challenge of keeping the family's kitchen kosher, and she longs for an environment where she feels she belongs.

Longing is the word she uses, as others do in News from Heaven—not always in regard to Bakerton, but always in regard to belonging. The desire to belong

Reviewed by Janet Potter, CENTURY editorial assistant.

to a place or a person is universal, but belonging to a place as historied, solid and unmoving as Bakerton can also feel inescapable. Some of Bakerton's residents sink into it, basing their lives solely in and about the town, and others rage against it, trying again and again to sever the tie.

Those who stay long for something more, usually love: Bakerton has its fair share of spinsters. A single schoolteacher reminisces about the summer she spent with her handsome cousins before they went to war and ignores a closeted gay male student who needs her support. A middle-aged woman who devoted years to nursing her sick parents moves in with a handyman 20 years younger than her, overlooking any sign that he might be in the relationship for her money.

And those who leave long to return. Annie Lubicki returns to Bakerton to resume her place on the family farm. Sandy Novak, the youngest of the five siblings, lives on the edge of the law in Las Vegas and California. He can't get by without the support of his sisters back in Bakerton and wonders aloud about returning for good.

None of the characters in News from Heaven are fully present in their own lives. They're focused on the past, or on what might have been, or on where they might go, but everyday life doesn't hold anyone's full attention, even as Bakerton holds them irrevocably in place. Particularly in the later stories, which take place after the mines have closed and Bakerton is reduced to a purgatory for longtime residents, the inertia that keeps them there seems all the more malicious the more it goes unquestioned. Not that everyone in Bakerton is unhappy—many are very happy and wouldn't want to leave-but the choices they make are constrained by their hometown. Their individual searches for belonging were over before they began because they all belong to Bakerton, whether they want to or not.

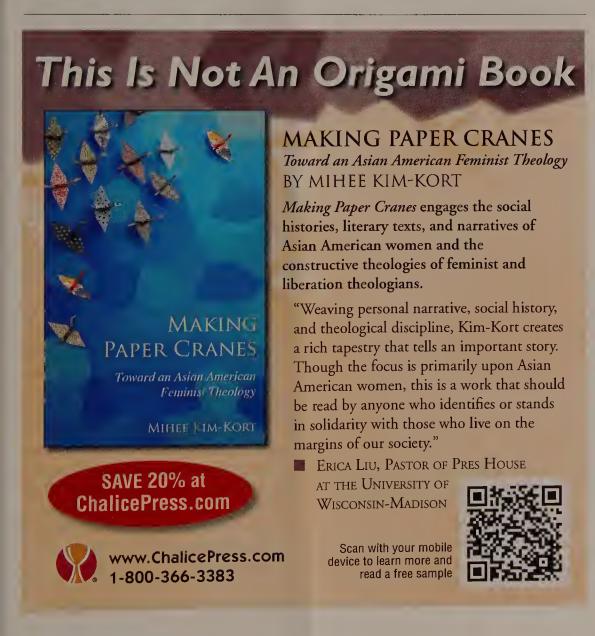


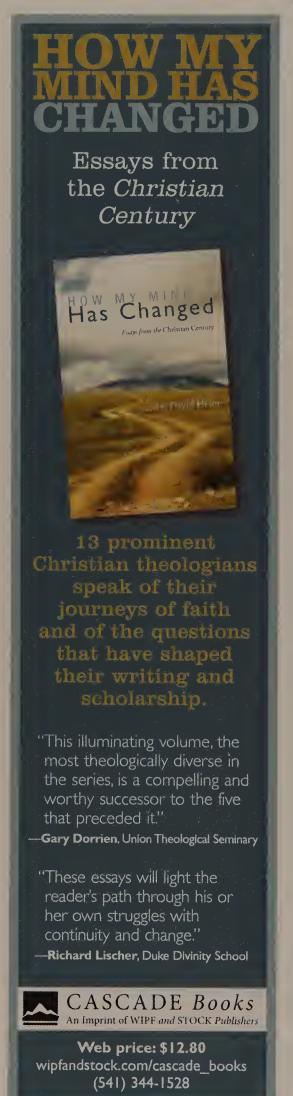
Frances and Bernard By Carlene Bauer Houghton Mifflin, 208 pp., \$23.00

This is that rare novel in which the main characters are theologically literate. Frances, writing about Simone Weil, throws off this zinger: "There are times that I think her theology might have sprung fully formed from her migraines." Based on the exchanges of letters between Robert Lowell and Flannery O'Connor in the 1950s, the novel tells how Bernard and Frances-two writers who met at a writers' colony—share their lives mostly through long-distance letter writing. An occasional exchange of letters with friends discloses to the reader what each is thinking about the other. Bernard, who struggles with mental illness for which he's hospitalized, would love to marry Frances. Frances is reluctant to let a relationship that dances on the edge of romance to go any further. Bauer is also the author of a memoir, Not That Kind of Girl, about growing up as an evangelical.

Struck from Behind: My Memories of God By James C. Howell Cascade, 170 pp., \$20.00

Howell grew up in a nominally Christian family that occasionally attended a Southern Baptist church. He claims the Baptists tried to kill him! A rather insecure young person with apparent intellectual gifts, he was advised to become a medical doctor. Instead, he pursued a life in pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church and also earned a doctorate in Old Testament. Howell is at his best when he talks about pastoral ministry, even though he claims that this memoir isn't about pastoring, and he is quite open about his personal struggles as a pastor. He veers toward sentimentality when writing about his own family, especially his children.





on Media

Power couple

s the first program available only through Netflix's streaming service, House of Cards is an experiment in delivering digital content in a way that maximizes profit. Netflix released the entire season at once on February 1. House of Cards is political theater centered on congressman and House majority whip Frank Underwood and his wife Claire (played by Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright). The show is based on a novel by Michael Dobbs and adapted for the American audience from a British drama.

Claire alone calls Frank "Francis." I doubt that the American adapters of the series changed the wife's name from Elizabeth to Claire to provide an allusion to another saint of Assisi, but after the flurry of comment on the pope's choice of the name Francis—a signal of solidarity with the poor and the vulnerable—both names resonated with me.

If the witness of Francis and Clare was possible only in a world full of the grace of God, the story of Frank and Claire Underwood is plausible only in a world stripped bare of that grace. The plotting is blunt about this: Frank's devotion to power at any cost is the devotion of a man bereft of God. Frank and Claire's story is one of grasping for power, a story of corruption, conspiracy and coldness.

The show is marbled with moments of direct address from Frank to the audience, a Shakespearean device that does a lot of work. When Frank looks straight at the camera, his asides become an avenue for the terrible and honest words that he

rarely speaks to his wife, his colleagues or the public. The device draws the viewer in; we almost become Frank as he includes us in the truth about himself. "Power is a lot like real estate," he says, "It's all about location, location, location. The closer you are to the source, the higher your property value."

His plot to draw near that power makes for can't-look-away viewing, and Wright and Spacey give remarkable performances. They portray a marriage built on an agreement that power is everything. It is a marriage that refuses to play by traditional rules and, in that refusal, works chillingly well in a way that makes it all the more interesting when that agreement begins to show signs of cracking. Frank and Claire's extreme competence makes them great at what they do, and in the Underwoods' house of cards, everything—sex, money, marriage, career, people—is an exercise of power. In the politics of the show, religion is power too.

We feel God's absence all the more in two significant church scenes. Near the beginning of the season, Frank is shown in his hometown church masterfully using Christianity as a tool. He is a perfect mimic of the cadences of faith, and he uses it to get what he wants. In the season's last episode, a brilliant shot moves us from Frank set against a towering cathedral—most of the screen filled with the vertical space of the building—to Frank before the altar, the camera looking down on him.

Frank lifts his face to heaven and meets the viewer's eyes for one of his familiar direct addresses, this time to a

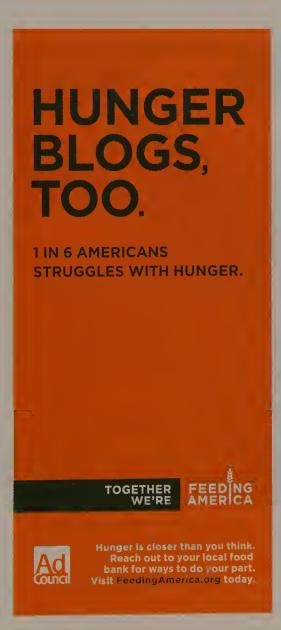


WARRIORS: Robin Wright and Kevin Spacey play a ruthless political couple in House of Cards.

god whose place we occupy: "Every time I've spoken to you, you've never spoken back. Although, given our mutual disdain, I can't blame you for the silent treatment." Frank's face fills the whole shot as he looks straight at us: "Perhaps I am speaking to the wrong audience." The camera shifts, and Frank looks down, shifting his address to an imaginary Satan: "Can you hear me? Are you even capable of language if you only understand depravity?" A door opens, and we see the tiniest weakness in Frank's armor as he wonders whether the worst of his own depravity is coming to meet him. But the moment of vulnerability is gone in an instant: it's just a janitor, opening a door-beneath Frank's notice.

Francis of Assisi would not have dismissed the janitor, but Frank Underwood never thinks of doing otherwise. He kneels, and now he is looking down on us: "There is no solace above or below. Only us. Small. Solitary. Striving. Battling one another. I pray to myself, for myself." House of Cards is great television and a chilling portrayal of a world without God.

Reviewed by Beth Felker Jones, who teaches at Wheaton College in Illinois.





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TTERS

Bible is this: "Just tell the story. When you're tempted to elaborate and explain, bite your tongue and pray silently. The kids will make of it what they will, and as the story lives in them, they'll keep reinterpreting it all their lives."

(Continued from page 6)

Nancy Gaston christiancentury.org comment

In my experience it's the storytelling we've let go of, not just the text. Sitting around the fire with other adults, sharing community support in listening, is what brings children along, too, to the time when they can appropriate the more troubling parts of the story for themselves. It does matter in what context children first hear about the rape of Dinah or the near sacrifice of Isaac.

Beth Goss christiancentury.org comment



could not agree more with Wilson's I final comments. The Bible is a problematic book, but we do no one a service by censoring it. When we present children with a dumbed-down Bible, we "effectively bore them right out of any salutary struggles with the scripture." First impressions are crucial, and if a child's first impression of the Bible is of a nice, neat little storybook with moralized lessons, they will soon outgrow the Bible. Who needs a little kids' book when you are faced with the messiness and complexity of life?

Thus, many adults conclude as Homer Simpson does when he says dejectedly, holding a Bible, "Oh, there are no answers in here." But if we present the unedited Bible to people-presumably they can handle it in their early teens—then they learn to embrace the Bible as a meaningful book which reflects the realities of life.

Mark Roncace christiancentury.org comment

The Bible is for all of humanity, including children. If we read children the stories the way they are given to us in the Bible, they are truly multigenerational—as they have been for thousands of years. Children need to know that adults are fragile and stupid and that children are vulnerable, as well as very important in the plot lines of history—even in the violent ones. Children hear stories and self-select what they can manage internally—as long as we don't labor the point. Most of the difficulty arises when we try to rewrite the Bible, as if we could improve it.

Children need all the complexities of the cross narratives. They need to grow up hearing that in Genesis there are two creation narratives, side by side, that cite events in a different order. They need to grow up knowing how to tell history from a parable, and to hear the narrative that threads the laws of Leviticus together. Remember that the Bible is fundamentally an oral tradition for sharing in multigenerational community, not a textbook to be taught to single-age classes or read by yourself. Remembering this changes all of the protocols that might be assumed in individualist developmentconstrained didactic models.

Beth Barnett christiancentury.org comment



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GLOBAL CHURCH

Church of William Harris

his year marks the centennial of an explosive L episode in modern Christian history. In July 1913, a prophetic evangelist named William Wadé Harris began his march across the French colony of Ivory Coast, calling people to live purely and to reject pagan religion. The astonishing impact he achieved suggests the deep popular thirst for his words and for the distinctly African style in which he clothed it. Some observers claimed he won 100,000 converts within a few months until panicked French authorities drove him out of the country. Although prophets abounded in 20th-century Africa, Harris's sweeping religious revolution marked the beginning of a critical new phase of mass evangelization.

Harris's name is familiar enough in the story of Christian Africa, and Mark Noll and others have listed him among the century's most significant Christian figures. His life repays study for what it tells us about his mission's appeal. It also reminds us of a horrendous, and largely forgotten, aspect of the Western Christian encounter with Africa.

Born in 1860, Harris came from the Grebo people of Liberia—a context critical to understanding him. Anyone interested in antebellum American history knows the debate over whether freed slaves should be resettled in Africa and how that idea led to the creation of the colony of

Liberia in 1822. Few nonspecialists, though, know how grimly that scheme worked out

The American sponsors made no effort to determine the views of the existing residents about that settlement. They worked on the theory that, well, they're all Africans, so surely they'll all get along. The Americanized black elite—the Americo-Liberians -seemed to represent progress and modernity. The capital, Monrovia, took its name from a U.S. president, and the Liberian flag was a variant of the stars and stripes. Until 1980, the ruling party was the True Whigs. Who could criticize such a Little America?

Unfortunately, that elite also inherited American ideas of racial hierarchy. It positioned itself as the master caste and native Africans as the underclass. Although the elite made up only about 5 percent of the population, it denied political rights to the indigenous Kru people, whose various groups included the Grebo. These divisions shaped the politics of the new nation, and open warfare erupted repeatedly over the next century. While the Americo-Liberians presented a civilized face to the West, they maintained their power by massacre and torture.

Christianity made very slow progress among native peoples, for the creed was associated with an exploitative master race, even if, in this instance, the bosses were themselves of African descent. In Liberia, as in South Africa or the Congo, it took a rare genius to distinguish between the authentic core of Christianity and its imperialist trappings.

William Wadé Harris was such a person. He became a Christian about 1881, dividing his loyalty between the Episcopal and Methodist churches. Accepting Christianity, though, did not mean abandoning his people's struggle for justice, and in 1909 he was imprisoned for trying to replace the Liberian regime with direct British rule. It was while in prison that he received his prophetic calling, reportedly from the Archangel Gabriel. On his release, he began his march into the Ivory Coast and Ghana, initially among fellow Grebo but soon reaching across trib-

Harris proclaimed a Christ who was not the property of the master race, whether French, British or Americo-Liberian. He appeared in African style, wearing a white robe and a turban, carrying a bamboo cross and a baptism bowl and accompanied by his wives.

Critically, his mission recognized the deadly serious nature of the native faiths with their belief in ancestors and witchcraft, which Western missionaries mocked. When Harris reached a village, his followers' first step was to collect and burn the pagan fetishes. The scene could have been taken from a churchly account of a European saint of the early Middle Ages. And as in those earlier times, incredible results followed. The local Roman Catholic vicar apostolic was soon describing "a whole people who, having destroyed its fetishes, invades our churches en masse, requesting Holy Baptism."

Although the mission spawned "Harrist" churches that survive today, Harris himself had no time for denominations, and he warned his followers that they should wait for godly preachers who would follow him. Decades later, newly arrived Methodists were delighted to find the old converts pouring into their newly founded churches.

Earlier missionaries had introduced Christianity, but Prophet Harris offered it anew in African style and tried to lift his people above divisions of race and power, violence and tribalism. When later travelers visited the region, they heard old Harris followers recalling him lovingly: "He taught us to live in peace."

Philip Jenkins's Notes from the Global Church appears in every other issue.

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Art



The Last Supper, by Jerry Geier

Vermont artist Jerry Geier's sculptures often feature commonplace moments and ordinary people. Even the material he uses—terra-cotta—reflects the most common of elements, earth. In this representation of the Last Supper, in which Jesus' back is to the viewer, Geier captures a moment of companionable humor. Trust and appreciation are on the faces of the disciples. But clearly something else is also going on. Arms stretched as though in embrace and blessing, Jesus is the one who faces the window, the curtains blowing. "The window shows a breeze, which I see as a symbolic breath of fresh air, new life, perhaps the Holy Spirit flowing in," Geier writes. "It all takes place in a modest little house of some kind, with wooden floors and simple walls."

-Lil Copan

AMERICAN SOUNDINGS

"I'm fascinated by culture—the things people make and are made by, whether its music, television shows, sports, consumerism or technology.

I try to look at these realities from the perspective of eucharistic worship, which centers all of life and creates its own culture.

Beginning at that fertile eucharistic center, there's no end to what Christians can learn, explore and enjoy."



Rodney Clapp's books include *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People,* Not Angels and Johnny Cash and the Great American Contradiction.

Rodney Clapp writes "American Soundings" for the Christian Century.

